Dark Contemplations
by
Tony Vick

A Collection of Poems
from inside the razor wire
About the Author:

Tony Vick was born in 1962, in Clarksville, Tennessee, into a home of Southern Baptist parents and an older brother. His father was a barber and gospel singer, and his mother was a stay-at-home mom. Tony’s parents and brother have all died during Tony’s incarceration.

Tony entered prison twenty years ago after living thirty-four years in Freedomsville as a closeted gay man. He is currently serving two life sentences for murder. While in prison, Tony has worked as a GED teaching assistant, clerk, and prison newspaper editor. He has been involved with Inside-Out prison programs where free-world college students travel to prisons and join incarcerated students as classmates in post-secondary courses built around dialogue, collaboration and experiential learning. Between 2010 and 2014, Tony completed five semesters in Vanderbilt University’s Divinity School Inside-Out program.

In 2013, Tony’s essay, “Look at Me,” was published in a book, Turning Teaching Inside Out: A Pedagogy of Transformation for Community-Based Education, by Simone Weil Davis and Barbara Sherr Roswell. In 2016, Tony’s thoughts on forgiveness were included in Michael McRay’s book, Where the River Bends: Considering Forgiveness in the Lives of Prisoners. Tony continues to write essays and poetry that challenge readers to address prison reform as one of the most important social issues of this generation. A collection of Tony’s essays and poems, called Secrets from a Prison Cell: A Convict’s Eyewitness Accounts of the Dehumanizing Drama of Life Behind Bars, (Foreword by Fr. Richard Rohr, O.F.M.) will be published by Cascade books and available in 2017.

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There are a few seconds each morning where I find myself in complete peace. The moments, just as I am waking up – before I succumb to the realization of my existence. It's the time of the day before the look, the feel, the taste of prison envelopes me. In these moments, I am free, and equal to all of humanity.
Once a Slave... Always a Slave?

I've been marked today
Branded as a slave to the state
Right there, on my right wrist
A plastic band clamped with metal clasps

Itchy
Sweaty
Pulling at my arm hairs

A constant reminder that: I'M PROPERTY

Send me where you wish, Master
I'll avert my eyes from yours as you walk by -- as you directed
Cause eye contact will make you remember
Remember that you are my slave master
Will you recollect these eyes when I am your neighbor?
Will you then greet me -- acknowledge my presence?
Or will you still avert your eyes -- so as not to remember
Remember that you were my slave master

I've been marked today
Branded as a slave to the state
Will this harsh treatment keep me from returning to this HELL?
Or will it break my ability to ever TRUST or INTEGRATE into the world?
You have the power -- given by whom?
Is your ego stroked when you put me on the block for display?

"Look at my obedient slave -- I've broken him from wrong doin."

Will you recollect these wounds when you see me at Walmart?
Will you greet me -- acknowledge my presence?
Or will you still announce to the passersby:

"Look at my obedient slave -- look at his wrists -- the imprint is still there."

"HE'S NOTHING"
"HE'S WORTHLESS"

by
Tony Locke
| If these moments are no more  | Everything I need to fulfill my potential |
| How will my earthy seconds weigh out | I was not created with memories of heaven or death |
| Have I given more than taken | Apparently I should not concern myself with such things |
| Loved more than hated | |
| Laughed more than cried | |
| Does it all matter | This moment |
| Is this place a mere | This moment |
| stepping stone to another world — a heaven | I can barely comprehend |
| How does one get there | I cannot see it fully |
| Will the moments loved decide | But this is actually happening to me right now |
| Will a covering of blood be needed | |
| Certain prayers, tasks, verses | |
| There are words — so many words to consider | The universe that formed my cells — will hear |
| which ones and from who | Hear my prayers |
| This vessel not created with a script to follow no embedded words | Senses created for this world |
| If I am to believe that I was created by God | Let me touch and be touched |
| I must also believe that she created me with her best product | Play the music — the glorious sounds |
| | The aroma of cinnamon rolls |
| | fresh from the oven |
| | I smell them — I taste them |
| | How marvelous this moment is |
| | It is — all I know |

Tony Vick
3-8-15
You Left a Map
2-20-15

The sun does not bring its usual refreshing enthusiasm about starting the day.
thump thump thump thump

It's still beating not rushing forward like an energetic child but like a stubborn mule being pulled against its will.

This day, like yesterday
Lonely
Bored
Heavy
thump thump thump thump thump

What keeps it charged blood trickling now not racing pushed through by blood thinners and cholesterol meds

This day, like yesterday
Miserable
Isolated
Cold

You left a map for my soul it follows blindly, yet faithfully it follows love it follows God.
Keep beating my weary heart for there are things ahead you have not imagined.
# The Room
(The Prison Within Prison)

| It’s locked                              | Who wants to be at risk to return – or go – that is
| at least for now                         | I don’t
| The room – blacked out                   | you don’t
| from seeing in or seeing out             | The story must be told
| chaos                                    | from within the room
| blood                                    | nothing to lose
| violence                                  | Write it in blood-on tissue
| uncertainty                               | to remember – that is
| fear                                     | That’s the only way
| spiteful solitude                        | I know
| That’s what is in there                  | we know
| I know                                   | Once out of the room
| we know                                   | we forget
| No map to get there                      | we lose touch
| random                                   | we run away
| vindictive                                | Intense indoctrination and
detrimentive...maybe                      | determined desensitization
| Once out you don’t                      | They create living ghosts
| want to go back                          | That’s what they hope for
| Whatever it takes                        | The fear will win
| say what                                 | The mystery will linger
| do what                                  | Lost in longing
| forget about who                         | Close the door
| Whatever it takes                        | the light hurts my eyes
| It should be told                        | Darkness doesn’t hide
| what happens there                       | the eyes of God.
| But who wants to remember                |   
| Who wants to be linked                   |   

Tony Vick
Your heart will not be denied.
Your heart will wait patiently for you to catch up.
Your heart will not be denied.
Your heart will yearn for its desire.
Your heart will not be denied.
Your heart will cry out when it is in pain.
Your heart will not be denied.
Your heart will take control of your thoughts if left unattended.
Your heart will not be denied.
Your heart will bleed with the sins of your past.
Your heart will not be denied.
Your heart will change your life if you submit to its pleasure.
Your heart will not be denied.
Your heart will beat strong with the truth if you march to its rhythm.
Your heart will not be denied.

Stop

(1999)
it's not what i imagined

this day i woke up in a steel cage
surrounded by a bunch of strange people
have i been shipwrecked on an island
or am i still dreaming in my sleep
should i get out of this bunk
and face whatever awaits
or should i turn over, close my eyes
and pray for more sleep

sleep won't come

moving about on new territory
trying to get my sea legs
on this rocky boat

I must be steady
cause sharks are looming
waiting, watching for vulnerability

i'll survive
i always do
at least i have a history

but must it always start out
so difficult

it's not what i imagined my life would be
It's Been Too Long

I've lost the sound of your tender melodic voice
amongst the screaming of foul-tongued men spewing profanity.
I've lost the touch of your hand and your delicate fingers
amongst the feel of steel and shackles cutting at my skin.
I've lost the rose-petaled smell of your silky skin
amongst the stench of sweat and shit.
I've lost the softness and wisdom of your eyes
amongst the cold grey stares from strangers and oppressors.

My sensations numbed
from deliberate removal from life – real life.
I've been banded like a homing pigeon
bound to its owner –
always marked:

"If found return to ..."
How long is too long?
How long before I don't want to remember,
can't remember?

I'M HERE
WHERE ARE YOU?
DON'T FORGET ME

[Signature]
Reality Monster

Reality is a peculiar monster
   it must be faced
   whatever the fear may be

The monster can be avoided
   for a time . . . maybe

Different paths may skirt the monster
   for a time . . . maybe

IGNORING
   for a time
   the ugliness that awaits

But It Does Await

More time may be needed
   to prepare your brain
   for the fight

But the fight is your fight
   a one-man army

The monster is devious and manipulative
Years of maneuvers and practice
It knows all your weaknesses
   all your insecurities

His arrow is sharply aimed at your
   Achilles heel

When ready
   TURN
   WALK boldly toward the monster
   DON'T BLINK
   DROP your veil and say

"Hello monster
   Kiss my Ass"

Then surrender to his embrace
Walk On

It is never what it seems
There is always more to the story
We render immediate judgments
But we really don’t know

What is his story
That is the real question
But it takes too much time to uncover
So we really don’t know

He just wasn’t born so “whatever”
What were the paths he chose
This is part of his story
Too little time to know

So walk on my friend
If you stop, you will unveil
The mystery of his person
The fact that he is human

Don’t ask any questions
You may discover his torment
The tragedy and sorrows of his life
The fact that he is human

Walk on dear friend
Once you see, hear, understand
You will no longer be able to deny
The fact that he is human
My hands touched God’s hands today
He was tired, sick, discouraged
Helpless, he was, and hot with fever
But he was God, and I knew it
Did others not see the glow of
angels’ wings all around?
I placed ice cubes on his lips
and fed him chicken broth
Could others not feel his holiness?
I realized the only reason I recognized
God was my closeness to him,
unafraid and thankful to be at his feet.
In Those Moments

It happens occasionally
Someone just extends her hand
It catches you off guard
It is not a normal occurrence
But it happens
When you least expect it
A smile, a letter, a card, a kind word
Just when you need it
God presenting himself to us
Through his beloved creatures
In those moments
Those very special moments
We touch the hand of God
And feel his love, compassion and forgiveness
In those moments
Everything is okay
The strength to go on exists
A miracle
That is what it is
God loving us
That is what it is
And even though we recognize it only occasionally
I’m sure it happens often
Miracle moments
I Shall Not Die Alone

If today becomes my last moment on earth,
I shall not die alone.
I will not hear the whispers of hope
muttered from a stranger.
I will not seek comfort from a preacher
whom I've never met.
But I will remember the eyes that have looked into
mine with love and inspiration.
Drifting through my mind will be words that
have uplifted me—the real me.
The one not bridled with deception and fear.
I will feel the touches of those who
were not afraid to reach out to an
outcast of the world.
If today is my last day, I don't need
medical folk simply doing their job.
I just need to remember.
Remember the words of my God.
Remember the love of my friends.

I shall not die alone.
Maybe Tonight

It’s hard to watch the sun go down knowing that another
day has come and gone.
Maybe tonight will be the one where I slip into the arms
of God—comforted, loved and secure.
Maybe tonight I’ll trade this old body in for the soul that
lingers beneath.
Maybe tonight I’ll cry my last tear for the sins of my past.
Maybe tonight the memories that haunt me will become
a forgotten past.
Maybe tonight I’ll bow before my king and embrace the
majesty of a future undeserved but given by grace.
Maybe tonight.

by Tony Web
The Perfect House

It looks good from a distance.
But secrets are held inside.
The ground is shaky.
The house was built on lies.
The dwellers seem all American,
until you open the hidden door.
It shakes the foundation.
The truth must be released—even if
the perfect house is demolished.
Sometimes, it's better to tear it down and
start from scratch.
Some things can't be repaired.

by Tony Cline
I See a Home

I see a home for me
Whittled amongst the weathered wood
A crevice to rest my worn body
A place of solace to smell the sweet scents of freedom
A place for me to exist
One that you envisioned long before I did
There it is—just beyond the horizon
A cozy warmth from the mud brick fireplace
The one you made, brick by brick, drying in the sun
A pot of stew smelling of pearled onions and rosemary
The one you made, cutting each piece of beef precisely even
A chair by the window draped with a beautiful quilt
The one you made, stitch by stitch, just for me
A door that swings both ways, no locks
The one you hung for me—never to be confined again

I see a home
Just for me

The one you made
Stay With Me

DEATH why do you
torment me so
the tease of you looms
over me with great expectation
fear of your occurrence is
being replaced with
excited anxiousness
you have grown closer to me
I feel your breath on my neck
it brings me comfort
stay with me
you keep leaving
will you wait until the
darkness blends the land and sky
how do I make you
feel welcomed
I pray to see the blackness
of the space you inhabit
don't leave
stay with me

I feel your breath on my neck
When You Smell a Flower

When you smell a flower
Do you pluck it from the ground
and bring it to your nose?
Are you in a green field dotted with
spots of wild, vibrant colors?
Are you receiving a bouquet of
fragrant roses from a lover?
Are you standing at a coffin where
tribute blooms blanket the sleeping box?
When you smell a flower

When you smell a flower
you are amidst life, love,
excitement, sadness.
When you smell a flower

When I smell a flower
It's a phantom of a memory needed to
conjure up a feeling of good, hope, love,
but it's a mirage in the field of stone.
When I smell a flower

By Tony Vick
Let me hold lightly things of this earth
Transient treasures, what are they worth?
Moths can corrupt them, rust can decay
All their bright beauty fades in a day.

Let me leave a love that abounds
To all my dear friends still around
Let them remember the love in my heart
Cause until I knew them my life didn't start.

They taught me to love and opened my mind
To live out my truth and how to be kind
I learned how to smile and laugh out loud
How to walk in the rain and not fear the cloud

For the sun will appear just over the way
And it really doesn't matter what others may say
Just live out my dream no matter the place
Cause love has no boundaries, it cannot be incased.

So yes, my dear friends, I owe you my life
Without you I would still walk in strife
Wherever you are, my love will be sent
My devotion to you will never be bent.

Remember me for the laughter we shared
Not for the sins that I sired
Remember me for the love in my eyes
Not for the tears that I cried
Remember me for my quick wit
Not for the hearts that I split
Remember me for my gentle touch
Not for the dollars that I clutched
Remember me for the lives that I filled
Not for the lives that I killed
Remember me for coming to terms
Not for the bridges that I burned
Remember me for being a friend
Not for a heart that wouldn't bend
But most of all...just remember me.

**A life not remembered is a life not worth living.**

The branches reach out for new life to appear. A budding hope for a new season. It waits -- unsure if its roots can produce another green leaf. It waits, it hopes.


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The Perfect House

It looks good from a distance. But secrets are held inside. The ground is shaky. The house was built on lies. The dwellers seem all American, until you open the hidden door. It shakes the foundation. The truth must be released -- Even if the perfect house is demolished. Sometimes, it's best to tear it down and start from scratch. Some things can't be repaired.

To Get You Must Give

This world has not found me happiness
nor has it willed its nature for me a peaceful heart.
The skies have not shown me clear blue skies
nor have they shined a path for me to start.
The oceans have not calmed
nor have they parted a way.
The winds have not ceased to blow
nor have they cooled my day.
The grass has not been green
nor has it eased my fall.
The stones have not been smooth
nor have they been easy when I crawl.

But as I ponder my fate to this day
I must be honest so let me say:

I have not given this world any valuable gift
nor have I walked a decent path.
I have not sought the truth or the light
nor have I reframed from showing my wrath.
I have not studied to make a change
nor have I played in the symphony's band.
I have not conserved the earth's beauty
nor have I planted one tree on the land.
I have not preserved the life or the blood
nor have I remained a favorite son.
I have not ignored temptation of the flesh
nor have I rejected the flight or the run.

So let my amazement and tears so depressed
Fall on death ears to those who've been blessed.

For they probably learned more quickly than me
To get you must give was their earnest plea.
So as long as I have breath and there is blood in my veins
I will work to diminish the tragedy and the pain.
To get I must give will be my final thought
In order to repair the damage that I sought.

Tony Vick -2008-
If today becomes my last moment on earth, I shall not die alone. I will not hear the whispers of hope muttered from a stranger. I will not seek comfort from a preacher whom I've never met. But I will remember the words that have echoed in my mind with love and inspiration. Drifting though my mind will be faces of souls that have embraced me — the real me. The one not burdened with deception and fear. I will feel the touches of those who were not afraid to reach out to an outcast of the world. If today is my last day, I don't need medical folk simply doing their job. I just need to remember. Remember the words of my God. Remember the love of my friends. I shall not die alone.

Your heart will not be denied.
Your heart will wait patiently for you to catch up.
Your heart will not be denied.
Your heart will yearn for its desire
Your heart will not be denied.
Your heart will cry out when it is in pain.
Your heart will not be denied.
Your heart will take control of your thoughts if left unattended.
Your heart will not be denied.
Your heart will bleed with the sins of your past.
Your heart will not be denied.
Your heart will change your life if you submit to its pleasure
Your heart will not be denied.
Your heart will beat strong with the truth if you march to its rhythm.
Your heart will not be denied.

There are a few seconds each morning where I find myself in complete peace. The moments, just as I am waking up — before I succumb to the realization of my existence. It's the time of the day before the look, the feel, the taste, of prison envelopes me. In these moments, I am free, and equal to all humanity.

Flow river flow
Let me wade my feet in your clear mist
Flow river flow
Let me feel the wet, cool silk caress my skin
Flow river flow
Let me gaze upon the beauty of the forest that you breathe life into
Flow river flow
Let me wash away the guilt and shame of the world, into the stream of your forgiveness
Flow river flow
Let me drown my sorrows in your deep, dark pool of redemption
Flow river flow
Let me swim into the depths of your unknown and discover the secrets not yet discovered.
Flow river flow
Let me fall deep enough that I have no choice but to sink in the water to try and capture a bubble of hope
Flow river flow
Let me surrender to your power and take my limp body to the place you wash unwanted objects
Flow river flow
Let me go river, let me close my eyes forever, let my mind rest for my heart aches to stop beating
Flow river flow

Farewell, my dear one. Rest your weary eyes from the struggles you've endured. Soon these clouds will pass before me, and we will meet on the other side of the mountain. There, we will reminisce of happy times together, and see our mistakes from a new perspective. And we will realize how trivial they all seem, now that our souls gather for a new day ahead — just over the mountain.

It's hard to watch the sun go down knowing that another day has come and gone. Maybe tonight will be the one where I slip into the arms of God — comforted, loved and secure. Maybe tonight I'll trade this old body in for the soul that lingers beneath. Maybe tonight I'll cry my last tear for the sins of my past. Maybe tonight the memories that haunt me will become a forgotten past. Maybe tonight I'll bow before my King and embrace the majesty of a future undeserved but given by grace. Maybe tonight.

Oh God, can you hear me still when I plea,
Or have my failures covered your ability to see?

My agony and despair
over my struggle with life
And my sins still harboring the grief and the sin.

I pray I can hear your voice if it calls,
To me in my sleep
or before I fall.

The truth and the lies
have mixed for so long
That I sometimes don't
know the right from the wrong.

I struggle to find a purpose or cause
To keep living this life
to stop and take pause

Will my life find the road
and take the right way
That you have planned out
for each of my days?

I don't have the answers
and can't bear to think through,
All the sins of my past
for I know they are not few.

Hold onto me Lord
cause I have not a clue,
What tomorrow may hold
or what I must do.
My Friend Left Today

Emotions of happiness and sadness fill my heart.
I’m so proud of his endurance, accomplishments and patience.
But my heart already aches for the absence of my best friend.
I’m excited that he will be reunited with his family,
But I’m worried that he, my family, will be gone forever.
The new experiences he will have will be exciting,
But we will not share them together anymore.
My friends have left before.
I guess that is why it is so scary.
I know that today begins a new chapter for my friend and I.
Tomorrow the sun will rise, and people will go about their day.
Life goes on.
But my friend left a trace of his heart, his spirit, his life.
And those things will comfort me until I learn to accept
that he will not be back.
And Thank God For That!
Be free my friend,
Be free.
would I.....could I

at what point does the body's instinct
to live surrender to
its desire to die

If I swam out into the sea until
my limbs were exhausted
unable to return to shore

would I fight to stay afloat
or melt into the waves until blackness
caught my eyes

would I struggle for one more breath
or suck the water into my lungs
stopping air from feeding me

would I float on my back while the
sharks feed on my skin or dive into the depths
to see the sea bottom as my last sight

would I pray to God to help me
or ask Him to meet me
at the gate

would I.....could I
death is inevitable  
as it seems I am in human form  
that moment of darkness doesn't  
seem near—at least not today  
the thought of it doesn’t bring fear  
it seems rather like a prize we get  
for our endurance  
the fear, it seems, is not in death  
but in the waiting for it  
my heart beats fast each time  
a new pain fills my chest  
is this the beginning of the end  
the time of waiting is the ordeal  
we can fight against death  
but it will eventually win  
its prize is the dust from our  
bodies decomposed  
our prize is the endless sleep  
the rest, the peace — God  
death is inevitable  

Remember me for the laughter we shared  
Not for the sins that I bared  
Remember me for the love in my eyes  
Not for the tears that I cried  
Remember me for my quick wit  
Not for the hearts that I split  
Remember me for my gentle touch  
Not for the dollars that I clutched  
Remember me for the lives that I filled  
Not for the lives that I killed  
Remember me for coming to terms  
Not for the bridges that I burned  
Remember me for being a friend  
Not for a heart that wouldn’t bend  
But most of all—just remember me  

A life not remembered is a life not worth living.

(2011)

just remember