



Glenn Scofield Williams: I've always wanted to know: Why Portland for you?

Tom Spanbauer: Well, you know, it was strange, because I ended up here just kind of haphazardly. Because I was in New York City and I met this guy who taught at Lewis & Clark College and we fell in love. I needed to leave New York and here he was a tenured professor, and so I just came here because of him. Then I started these Dangerous Writers classes. And, you know, it never really felt like Portland was my home and I just kind of always thought that I'd be moving on. And here I am, you know, 20 years later.

Portland is growing. It's a metropolitan city now, and it can give me my city hit and a space that I can afford. And you know, it's just the perfect place. I've just really fallen in love with Portland since I moved into this house. Portland's my home. Absolutely. I didn't ever really think I could stay in this rain. But the rain doesn't bother me a bit now.

GSW: So how are you doing these days?

TS: Well, doing really well. You know last September, at the mid-valley Willamette Writers Conference, I had a stroke. I woke up and lost the whole left side of my body, pretty much. I thought it was Bell's palsy, but we came back to Portland and found out it was a stroke at OHSU. It turns out that I had a congenital hole in my heart that I had to get filled.

But they didn't know whether to fill it or not. The doctor told me the nature of the hole—it was where I was connected to my mother's heart. As an infant, when the child breaks off from the mother, most infants close that hole. I didn't. Soon as I heard the metaphor I said, "Let's close that fucker up."

So they shoved two Teflon rods up my crotch, and I watched them put this thing in. [*Shrugs, hands up in a "what can you do?" gesture*] You know, I always knew that the way to my heart was through my crotch.

Yeah, yeah. It was pretty tough. It was scary. And as far as the HIV goes, you know, I've got over 700 T cells and no visible viral load. So I'm doing very well.

GSW: Other than the book, what else is new with you?

TS: I have a boyfriend now. His name's Sage. He's with the Radical Fairies.

GSW: How did you meet Sage?

TS: Well, [about five years ago] my native brother—his name's Clyde Hall—he conducts this ceremony. And here I was in this sacred circle and I looked over and there was this young man standing there. And I don't know. It all happened in this circle that was designated just for sacred purposes. And here we are still.

GSW: Was he from Portland?

TS: No, he's from New Jersey. [*Laughs*] Yeah. I got an Italian boy from New Jersey. He just ended up in Seattle and then he went to and finished his BA at Evergreen College. And now he's here in town and has his own tattoo shop.

GSW: What's up these days with Dangerous Writers?

TS: Well, Dangerous Writers kind of—we've pretty much disbanded it, mostly because of my book tour this year. But when that's all over we're going to try to get together again. I think Joanna [Rose] and Stevan [Allred, two of the

primary teachers of Dangerous Writing] want to be on their own. And, you know, it's really fine with all of us. But as far as classes go, I still have a class on Thursday and we're still plugging away.

GSW: So, does the technique of Dangerous Writing mean as much "what you write" as "how you write"?

TS: Dangerous Writing, for me, is always about what I'm afraid of. People are always saying Dangerous Writing is about cannibalistic serial killers. But really what Dangerous Writing is about is going to the place that's secret, or where there's a big silence and all the fear that's inside that silence, or someplace where there's some kind of feeling that you're afraid to go to. By going to these places, really you are on the verge, like going to some scary parts of yourself. It's terrifying to look at this stuff.

It can be as simple as, "Hey, Tom, you've been a chump all your life or bullied all your life." But what is that really about? Because I've been bullied by the Catholic Church, my father and right on down the line, it's just kind of DNA or something? I just figure if someone disses me, I deserve it? And to change that! Well, first of all, to be aware enough in the moment to go, "Wait a minute, you can't do that!" So it's really an amazing thing to have happen.

GSW: After you've really gone to that place and rooted through it, do you come out changed? Is this kind of writing therapeutic?

TS: It is, quite. It's therapy as side effect, really. What happens is: There's someplace in me that comes to this awareness. And because I have a new awareness inside me now, the rest of me has to kind of adjust to it. What happens is almost like a kind of rebirth. And you know what's funny? After every novel, what do I do? After this one, I had a stroke. And what was it connected with? Mother. My mother died and here it is.

GSW: When did she pass?

TS: Three years ago, May 5.

GSW: While you were writing the novel?

TS: Yeah, while I was writing it.

GSW: Did it change your writing?

TS: It just deepened it. It gave me a lot more permission to go ahead and do what I wanted to.

GSW: Now *Is the Hour* has a lot to say about Catholicism, as expressed by the protagonist's mother in particular. Do you think there's any hope for Catholicism?

TS: Oh, jeez. What do I believe about that?

