

# Words and the Heart

By Allen Hoey

## *What Persists*

Ray, this is the second poem I've written for you. The first, a rambling thing in alternating elevens and nines, masked my sense of loss beneath politics and classical allusion. What did your death at twenty-three, dropped as you walked across campus, have to do with the hundreds slain in Beirut, with any other current slaughter, or with the legions dead in long poems in foreign tongues you'll never have the chance to read? When I read, by accident, a week too late to matter, how you died of heart attack—or was it stroke?—I would like to say I felt deep grief but the simple “stunned” comes closer. In the other poem I wondered how much your death—eight years my junior, my student—made me more conscious of my own. Then, beneath a freight of reasoning, I dismissed that possibility. Now I'm not so sure. Much as I mourn your loss—friend, a student whose claim on me grew as the semester passed, you, a chemist out of place, you presumed, in a poetry class, yet won at the outset when it was not words divorced from their human use you met but Bronowski's *Science and Human Values*, metaphors borrowed from a vocabulary you knew, and our talks, slow at first, then deeper, and that last visit, a month before you died when you dropped by and we did eight miles, you biking, me running, and we rambled about the flowers at the wayside, the late bloomers, ironweed and asters, chicory and sow thistle, and our futures, yours and mine—but see, I've done it again. Not classical allusions this time; I've buried you beneath the tissue of surface history, the whens and hows, straying from any sense of loss, of grief, into the familiar territory of poetry where words win distance from the heart. I meant to say simply that what persists, beyond any death, is the loss of what of ourselves we've invested foolishly outside ourselves. How that smarts, yet how we never learn. I come to see that though I miss our talks, you can be—and have been—replaced; other students now occupy my mind most days, and only moments, as now, late night, when I skim old poems and browse my elegy for you, you come to light. And what I think of now, once I've glossed your thin face and dark piercing eyes, your broad grin and earnest puzzled frown, is less you than the knowledge of your passing and your absence—the how you've left—that I will leave, I hope, and hope not soon—that I have not so much filled in as learned to live around.

*In memoriam, Ray Rizzo*

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## *Too Late To Call*

Their eyes shown green before the headlights caught three poised by the roadside, one just crossed, the others in stubble, shying from the light—time enough to brake slowly on the rain-slick road and glide between them, ghostly green orbs tracking as I pass, their shapes lost by the time I glance in the mirror, hands tense on the wheel through the next curve and over the final hill home. The deer you see is not the one who'll plunge, as blind to you as you to her—no warning, the thicket come alive, the windshield white with sudden light. I think to tell you this, who I've just left, phoning back along the straight wires strung above the winding roads, to hear your voice, muzzy now with wine and the slow approach of sleep. I can see, as I switch the ignition off, your long body sprawled already on the floral sheets, hair spilled over the pillow clearer a moment than the pale willows glowing where the headlights died. I could ring your limbs to sudden fury (though I'd rather rouse them stroking arms and legs until you smiled, still sleeping, and turned to open to me) to tell you what you surely know before I said a word.

▶ **ALLEN HOEY**, assistant professor of writing at Ithaca College, in Ithaca, New York, is a past winner of the Academy of American Poets Prize. His manuscript, *A Fire in the Cold House of Being*, won the 1985 Camden Poetry Award Winner; it was published in 1987 by the Walt Whitman Center. Hoey has also published a collection of sonnets, *Work the Tongue Could Understand* (1987), and translations of the poems of Georg Trakl, *Transfigured Autumn* (1985).

Hoey holds both a master's degree in creative writing (1980) and doctor of arts degree in English (1984) from Syracuse.

