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Deborah Tall : 09-04-2002

Deborah Anne Tall

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Tall:
"Wood Song:"

We each have our slice
of the dark
crossed or uncrossed
by the wild.

The doe puts herself
in danger, makes
less noise walking
than a cat

frights
at gust or birdcall
cupped ears
in command of the heart.

Before snow
came cloud, came
the northerly flow
of ice and hardscrabble.

The signified
is underfoot.
How hard it is
in truth
to break ground.
Will you come
to your name
will you

Rubin:
Welcome to the Brockport Writers Forum, an ongoing series of conversations with leading literary contemporaries. I'm Stan Rubin. Our guest today, Deborah Tall, is the author of four books of poems, most recently, "Summons," published in the year 2000 and winner of the Kathryn A Morton Poetry Prize from Sarabande Books. She's also the author of two books of non-fiction; "The Island of the White Cow," published in 1986 by Athenaeum, and "From Where We Stand, Recovering a Sense of Place," published by Knopf in 1993. She's also co-edited an anthology, "The Poet's Notebook," still in print, 1996. And with -- co-edited with Stephen Kuusisto and David Weiss. And she teaches -- she's a professor of English and writing at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York, where for many years she has served as the editor of the prestigious literary journal, "Seneca Review." It's a great pleasure to have you here.

Tall:
Thank you.

Rubin:
Deborah.

Tall:
It's my pleasure.

Rubin:
Long, long overdue. You've got a lot of hats -- we've just described -- as a writer. I'd like to refer back to the poem you just read, "Wood Song." I know the poem and I love it. It has a haunting and mysterious and evocative quality. I'm not going to ask you to explain the poem, but I wonder -- you read it in a very deliberate way. I wonder if you would say something about what the poem means to you or how the poem means for you.

Tall:
Well, I think of it as a real lyric, you know obviously it's not a narrative it's a moment of meditation. And increasingly over the years I've been writing in shorter lines with a kind of condensation and deliberateness of the line breaks. And so the pacing of that poem matters a lot to me. And I think it's one of those moments that poets always debate about; you know can language capture experience? Can you name something and hope to reproduce it in some way in a poem? And, you know watching that doe and trying to capture the mood of that moment, you know sort of leads to that final question; will you come to your name? Which of course it won't.

Rubin:
It won't. So, the experience in the center of the poem is the doe tentatively approaching.

Tall:
Yes. That notion of the wild and the domestic and kind of watching.

Rubin:
And we can't name him. We can't really name it.

Tall:
No. Well, we give it names, but we can't capture it in any sense. Yeah.

Rubin:
You have a very strong sense of the immediacy and the mystery of nature running through many of these poems. The speaker's right there in the immediate moment facing a natural realm that perhaps she would like to find more comforting than she does.

Tall:
Yes, yeah, well you get right to -- I think -- what I'm about as a poet in a way. I think that is the moment that begins me writing again and again, you know is a moment in nature. The intensity of experience somehow beckons me in some way to speak and yet they're always coming up against the unspeakable; you know the wild, the natural that refuses to be confined in nature. But it's the thing that, I guess I'm a bit pantheistic, it's -- for me -- it's the holy, you know to be out in the wild.

Rubin:

You have -- it occurs to me -- in your prose writing this same figure of a deer approaching.

Tall:

I think I have a thing about deer I have to say.

Rubin:

[inaudible] Yeah.

Tall:

Yes. I think, you know they're amongst the -- living in upstate New York they're amongst the gentlest of creatures and we kill them all the time with our cars and, you know everywhere you drive in upstate New York, you know twice on my way here today, you see the carcasses of deer on the road and it always kind of breaks my heart. I guess for me they -- they're such silent, beckoning forces and I always feel a kind of comfort and excitement in their presence.

Rubin:

You refer to the way -- and I refer to the way you read it -- you refer to the deliberateness of the lines. This poem, I should tell viewers, is written in four line stanzas and it adds to the sense of how deliberately chosen your language is, something that Charles Symbic [phonetic spelling] notes in the introduction to this book. How do you work a poem like this? I mean did it sort of come to you? Is it the fruit of much paring down or were there stanzas or thoughts that were in here that aren't here now? How does this deliberateness come to be?

Tall:

Well, it's carefully worked, obviously because it's not colloquial, it doesn't just sort of gush out. I tend to -- over the years, for whatever reason -- to work in very small units. I often work in fragments with just a line or a word or phrase and I accumulate them and then I'm looking for the moment that I can somehow bring it to fruition. And sometimes -- and I think in that poem, if I'm remembering correctly, I had pieces of it and I didn't know how they would go together, and finally I had the moment that I needed to frame those pieces and that thinking and put them together. But I do tend to cut back, even when I've got a poem on the page. I'm really aiming for concision, for the most succinct way to convey an emotion or scene, you know?

Rubin:

But the initial draft notations or fragments might be longer?

Tall:

Might be, yeah.

Rubin:

Or prosaic.

Tall:

Yeah, it depends on the poem. This one I think was always very small, but there are other poems that start larger that I pair down, you know?

Rubin:

It seems to me the opening, "We each have our slice of the dark," is already in a --

Tall:

Yeah.

Rubin:

It's very simple language, but it's already very intense.

Tall:

Yeah.

Rubin:

Something's at stake for our human being. It's not just a poem about nature.

Tall:

Exactly.

Rubin:

Yeah, the wildness is within.

Tall:

Right, as well as without.

Rubin:

So, your poems are interesting for what -- for the sense that there's things -- a lot they're not saying, that they don't want to say that [inaudible] the poem.

Tall:

Yeah. I really buy -- you know DW Snodgrass had that wonderful phrase in an essay, "Tact and the poet's force," which I completely believe in. That understatement -- there's great power in understatement, in English especially I think, very muscular language. And I believe in that sense of tact that you offer the reader the gift of -- the freedom to interpret in a way, and that there's a kind of respectfulness in not telling the reader everything, not hitting them over the head with meaning. I really -- I love that as a reader. I like to get a poem that I can live with and live within and not be told, you know what it means by the writer. And I aim for that, to create something that's evocative, inviting in some way, but not, you know -- has that element of tact.

Rubin:

Some of these poems are even more compressed than others in fact. It's like almost mysterious -- I meant they're almost challenging us to break open the narrative around them -- if that's not too strong a word.

Tall:

Yeah. Well, you know I'm taking that risk I think. There are times when probably I go too far and some people would say that they, you know -- you're not giving enough here. It's too reined in. You know, you're

resisting meaning too much, you're resisting the narrative. And that's something that I try to balance, you know I --

Rubin:

I wonder if you would say a little more about how you came to this particular stance. What were your origins in poetry? What has brought you to this place where you feel so sure really, and the poems read in a very sure way, as if the words are exactly where they want to be and somebody knew that?

Tall:

Yeah.

Rubin:

How did you come to be able to do that?

Tall:

How did I come to that? I think I -- I think that was what I was always drawn to in poetry when I started, when I was young. I loved EE Cummings when I was very young and then I loved Sylvia Plath, as most women of my generation did, and I was educated on Plath. And I loved the power and condensation of her language, which she was able to do. And those were my instincts as a poet, and then I got educated out of some of those instincts in my MFA program.

Rubin:

Where was that?

Tall:

At Goddard College in the late 70s. I had already -- I had lived in Ireland in the early 70s for five years. I had published my first book over there in London. And when I came back to go to an MFA program I felt a lot of pressure to conform to some of the prevailing aesthetic at that point and started writing more narratively. But my heart was never really entirely in that. And when I started writing prose, non-fiction, I felt very relieved that the poems didn't have to do that anymore, that I could use all my storytelling and analysis and other concerns, put them into the prose, and then reserve for the poems something else. You know, and so increasingly I've done that. I've really reinvented myself as a poet I guess in the last 10 years, and have moved more and more in that direction.

Rubin:

So, in Plath for example, you're as much called by the precision of the language as by the dramatic back story.

Tall:

Oh, it's much more. I've always been much more interested in her language than her psyche, you know? And I think her -- the musicality and intensity of her language is extraordinary.

Rubin:

It's taken a while for her to be really -- I think only recently really being appreciated for that.

Tall:

Yeah, well I guess because of the Women's Movement and the kind of place that she took in it. But you know, I love Hopkins for instance, and you know Seamus Heaney, I love a very lush and intense language, which is a little against the grain of most American poetry right now, but I've kept my loyalty to it and I'm relieved that it's being published and read.

Rubin:

Now you had this -- the first -- the book you published in London was what? Poetry?

Tall:

A book of poems first. Yeah.

Rubin:

And really in 86 "The Island of the White Cow," which details -- how long? A year?

Tall:

Five years.

Rubin:

Five years.

Tall:

The five years I lived in Ireland.

Rubin:

Five years, forgive me -- on this Irish island that was rather primitive, even by the current island standards.

Tall:

Yeah, quite. Yeah.

Rubin:

It didn't have electricity even did it?

Tall:

No electricity or running water. It was really a nineteenth century economy when I got there. It's changed, you know in the last years, but it was a remarkable place, a great experience.

Rubin:

And that book is as much a study of the island's human ecology as it is any kind of memoir really.

Tall:

Yes. I meant it to be that. I didn't mean it as a memoir. I really tried to keep me out of it as much as I could. For me it was a book about a place. It was like a biography of a place and I was only there as the convenient observer, you know and I had great love for those people and that landscape that I wanted to capture before it changed, because just

as I was writing it, it had begun to change. It got electricity, it got television, you know and the culture changes at that moment.

Rubin:
What's lost?

Tall:
Yeah. Oh, a lot of the oral culture, tradition, the uniqueness of their isolation. I mean they're an island seven miles out at sea and very remote, difficult crossing, so there wasn't a lot of influence over the years, you know and suddenly they were just sucked into the prevailing Irish and international culture that comes through TV.

Rubin:
The book did rather well.

Tall:
It has done well, yeah. It's back in print actually.

Rubin:
Oh, very good. That's nice to know. Who's doing it?

Tall:
Scribners.

Rubin:
Excellent. I'm glad to hear that. It's an excellent read and provocative in many ways about community and --

Tall:
Yeah, and it really led to the next book of non-fiction too. I mean because I -- going to Ireland -- you know I grew up in suburbia -- and going to that island, to that tight knit community, like 170 people, was for me the first experience of place, you know how a place can completely shape a human culture and the community, a group of people. And I've felt such a loss when I came back to the states. As much as I wanted to come back, for various reasons, I really felt that loss of community and intense identification with place so that "From Where We Stand" was a kind of meditation on that issue in my new environment in upstate New York.

Rubin:
Which was in upstate New York. So, it was quite --

Tall:
Yes. Yeah.

Rubin:
What did you find that was similar? What were the striking differences?

Tall:
The thing that -- well, obviously it's strikingly different in many ways. When we first moved up to Geneva, New York, we were living on the edge of Seneca Lake and looking at the opposite shore. We were on the western

shore, looking across towards the east, four miles across, and there would be moments where I would think, "Oh, I'm still on the island." You know there was that sense of the view and the watery light and watching the sun come up. And so it began to strike a chord of love in me, but at the same time there were the terrible ironies of where I was living and what times, for me really personified by the fact that we were on the flight path into the Seneca Army Depot, where all the nuclear arms were stored at that point, and during the deployment of the Pershing Missiles, I think in 84 this was. All night we were kept awake by transport planes coming in right across our house and going into the depot and taking off for Europe. So, that for me there was that terrific irony of this place of beauty I had found that kind of elicited in me the same sort of feelings I'd had in Ireland, but it was a community very unlike that and there was this other kind of terror behind it, you know and it was that that I felt I needed to write about. And I got into prose, you know? [inaudible]

Rubin:

I know there was a little bit of controversy locally around the book.

Tall:

There was a little. I mean a surprising amount given how few pages I actually devoted to the town of Geneva, I think about seven in all. It's a very personal book and it's a meditation on a lot of issues, you know and -- but you know people -- no one likes to be written about finally, because you -- they will always feel unflattered, I have learned.

Rubin:

Yes, people -- this many novelists have encountered that.

Tall:

Right. Yeah.

Rubin:

And during the time you were on the island were you writing poems and notebooks and journals?

Tall:

Oh, yeah. Oh absolutely. I was writing poems pretty steadily and that's -- my first book came out in London from -- it was written on the island. And I was keeping journals, which I thought I would make use of when I finally did write "The Island of the White Cow," but discovered that I had no need of. Right? Because I hadn't written down anything useful it turned out. And everything that was useful was very engrained in my memory. So, that was a time of a lot of reading. I really think my education happened in those long nights by the fire and the oil lamp, you know reading the long novels I hadn't had time for in college.

Rubin:

There wasn't cable television.

Tall:

Oh, gosh there was nothing, you know it was the radio, but it went off at a certain point, and really working on my poems. Yeah.

Rubin:

I wonder if you would read a poem that gives us some sense of a response, another response, to upstate New York. Perhaps "Prayer" on 57.

Tall:

Yeah, that is an upstate New York poem. 57.

Rubin:

I can kind of hear the landscape you were just describing.

Tall:

Oh, yeah it's exactly that landscape. Yeah. There's a couple of images of the kind of violence, the deer in there again of course, and -- it's called "Prayer."

The deer crossing signs are riddled
with bullets; practiced on pre-season.
And now heads of deer tilt
from car roofs, distracted.
We are their only predators, this is our season.
The stars fatten like pearls, not enough light
to read your face by and useless to wish on,
as restless as we are, crowing or shrinking.
All we can do is lend our bodies to life.
Listen, in the tall bushes
a bird crying out in a voice
so like a grieving woman's it
wrenches apples from the trees.
Dear mother of pearl, firmament in
which we graze, scatter your milk,
it's so hard to feed at God's body.

Rubin:

Again it's very obvious that from the title on, very sacramental kind of.

Tall:

Yes.

Rubin:

Poem, but a poem of spiritual difficulty.

Tall:

Yes, and also I'm reminded, reading it, that it's about the time I'm deciding to have children, you know so there's this birth images in there. You know the mother of pearl and the milk and the lending our bodies to life. I think that was one of the ways I was thinking about, you know contributing to the continuity.

Rubin:

I was just going to ask you, now where do children enter in?

Tall:

[inaudible] Yeah, well they did enter in at that moment. And you know that's where that decision to have children -- there's another poem in here -- what's it called? I think it's nearby. Let me find it.

Rubin:

Immense?

Tall:

Winter -- "Winter Field."

Rubin:

Okay, where's that?

Tall:

Which is a nature poem. Yeah, it's a nature poem, but it's really a conception poem too. It's written around the same time as "Prayer." Do you want me to read it?

Rubin:

Sure.

Tall:

Read it too? Yeah. "Winter Field," it's a kind of mock sonnet actually. These are more -- longer line poems than "Wood Song."

"Winter Field:"

Mornings, the lake makes itself a cloud out of
pure cold and water. We can only watch.
Perhaps we're here, like cows, so we can give
I say. Though I remember how we laughed
about that bishop who thought animals
were only in the world to keep meat fresh.
We wondered where that might leave us. Winter
under cultivation is as arable
as spring, says Dickenson. So, we walk the
January fields breathing a blizzard
of dry seeds, plowing our way through stubble.
At dusk new snow rubs out our traces.
I open my mouth to the sky until I know
my place, my center, this, where you plant your kiss.

So, conception and making life out of the winter and --

Rubin:

And being part of nature in some way.

Tall:

Yeah. Being part of nature. Yeah, entering that chain of life. Yeah.

Rubin:

Now, your children actually don't -- to this point. I know you're working on new stuff, but they don't really enter into this book much.

Tall:
Not a lot, no.

Rubin:
Fleeting presences and references.

Tall:
Right. There's a couple of -- there's a pregnancy poem and there's one where -- a couple poems where they occur, but --

Rubin:
Why is that?

Tall:
No, why is that? I think I was cautious about doing that. There are an awful lot of poets writing about their children and you know one thing that's -- I should say that's influenced me a lot -- is being an editor at a magazine.

Rubin:
I was going to get to that. How has editing a magazine --

Tall:
I think what it's -- is that -- what I read a lot of, I begin to bored by and push myself in another direction. And when I see a certain trend out there, when I see a lot of poets writing a certain kind of poem it begins to feel formulaic to me. And I think in the 80s I was feeling like, "I'm getting tired of reading, 'my son, 'my daughter,' 'my wife,' and I'm going to stop writing those poems." And saw -- in some ways my aesthetic has been reactive.

Rubin:
That's interesting. Nothing is more humbling than reading huge piles of poems.

Tall:
Thousands of poems, yeah.

Rubin:
Poems submitted to magazines are a context --

Tall:
Exactly. And it really pushes you to define your aesthetic, and either you embrace, you know -- you're inspired by what you're reading, but a lot of times -- I mean I love many, many poems, obviously, that I read and I publish, but I also -- it also really makes me feel like I know what's out there and I don't want to do exactly the same thing.

Rubin:
Let's talk about editing.

Tall:
Yeah.

Rubin:

Did that come initially with the job when you went [inaudible]?

Tall:

It came with my job. Yeah, I was very fortunate.

Rubin:

And you -- it's -- Seneca Review you've been editing for 20 years now.

Tall:

20 years and it's 32 years old.

Rubin:

And it's a very distinguished magazine.

Tall:

Thank you.

Rubin:

Which seems to define its feel -- it's poetry, there's, particularly more recently, lyric essays.

Tall:

Lyric essay, what we're calling poetic nonfiction. Yeah. When I took it over the conditions of it were such that I knew I couldn't do fiction. First of all I didn't think I had good instincts in fiction. I'd really been a poet and a nonfiction writer. And so I asked if I could concentrate on poetry and they said yes. And so I did just concentrate on poetry, but as I was writing nonfiction all those years I became increasingly interested in trying to bring that into the magazine and I was very drawn, both in my writing and what I read, to very lyrical nonfiction. I think in some ways poetry has more influence on the current nonfiction than fiction does. You know a lot of poets are writing nonfiction, as you know. And so I was interested in the ways that the influence of poetry was shaping an aesthetic in nonfiction and decided, I guess about five years ago, to start publishing essays that I thought of as experimental and particularly lyrical. And that's become a big piece of the magazine now. Yeah. Which is exciting. Yeah.

Rubin:

And has obviously, you just said, taught you, or helped you, find your aesthetic as a poet. Has it affected you as a prose writer? Are you still an active writer of nonfiction prose?

Tall:

Not as much, no. I've really thrown myself into the poetry in the last years. I've got one more book of nonfiction that I think is almost finished that I haven't published yet, but I have not moved beyond that.

Rubin:

What is the subject?

Tall:

The one I haven't published yet is a memoir and it is quite lyrical. It's experimental, which makes it a difficult thing to carry off in a memoir. I did not want to write a conventional memoir and yet I had a story I wanted to tell, and I did it in a meditative way. And it's not quite there yet, but it's called, "A Family of Strangers." And it's about my father and the mystery of his past because he was an orphan and didn't know where he had come from or who his parents were or their circumstances. It's sort of a little book -- a mystery story, finding out his story. You know posthumously.

Rubin:

Did he live to know you are a writer?

Tall:

No, no this -- oh, yeah, he knew I was a writer. He died 12 years ago, so my first few books were out. Yeah.

Rubin:

Were you encouraged by family in your literary mission?

Tall:

Can't say I was. No. That was sort of the last thing they would have expected. In a conventional family that weren't readers, they weren't highly educated. My father was an engineer; my mother was not educated very much. They loved art, they loved music, but it wasn't a big reading family certainly. And, you know they -- it was a pre-feminist era and they thought the most I really ought to aspire to was maybe to be a teacher. So, they didn't quite get my writing or -- and still don't, but they certainly respect it.

Rubin:

Yeah, they -- obviously were what you've achieved. And you're married to a writer.

Tall:

Yes.

Rubin:

So, that's -- how does that go? Is there any contention for space?

Tall:

No.

Rubin:

I hear you're very supportive of one another.

Tall:

We've been great. We really are and David, my husband, is terrific and we write differently and we've always co-existed wonderfully and been real good editors for each other's work and --

Rubin:

You do your first readers.

Tall:

We are first readers for each other and we know what to trust and not to, you know the ways that we're different and remarkably we have never had a moment of competition.

Rubin:

Incredible.

Tall:

At all. And we get along terrifically as writers. It's -- we're very lucky, you know because I know how hard that is.

Rubin:

I have --

Tall:

You've accomplished it too.

Rubin:

I have seen the two of you. Well, we're more contentious at times. I've seen the two of you be very supportive. And, David Weiss we're speaking of, is a very fine, well published poet.

Tall:

Thank you.

Rubin:

And novelist.

Tall:

And a novelist too.

Rubin:

Interesting you're both poets and prose writers.

Tall:

Right. But he's doing fiction and I'm doing nonfiction. Yeah, and we both came to that. We both thought of ourselves, at first for a long time, as poets and then went into prose. Yeah.

Rubin:

So, that's --

Tall:

Yeah, that's odd. Yeah.

Rubin:

-- One of those interesting things and you do have different areas, as you point out, in prose writing and you are each other's -- you have different sensibilities anyway as your work manifests and you are the first reader.

Tall:

Yeah.

Rubin:

Do you believe everything each one -- each other says?

Tall:

Well, not always. I mean, I think he's a great reader and I really trust him, but at a certain moment, you know I'll go back to my desk and say, "Well, you know, he really doesn't get that -- What I'm trying to do here and I'm going to take the risk and not listen to his advice." But he's a terrific reader, an amaze -- and he really will go with my aesthetic, even if he thinks it's not what he would best love to be doing. And I'm the same with him. I really admire what he does and respect it.

Rubin:

That's a good moment to take this other issue you mentioned. It was pre-feminist era you started writing, and you've got a nice career going in terms of achievement, you've done some fine books in different genres.

Tall:

Thank you.

Rubin:

You've done fine editing that is, you know nationally recognized, and you've wrote -- you had a couple of daughters, one I think you just took to college this week.

Tall:

Right. Yes.

Rubin:

And you're living with, married to for years, a working writer also. What -- how does this work out? How did it manage -- is it as easy as I just made it sound? How do you find time to keep writing?

Tall:

Yeah, I don't know. It -- sometimes it's amazingly difficult I think, and has -- is a stress that we've -- sort of don't understand the full impact of, but you know it's the generation before me who are the real heroes. I mean they're the ones who really broke through and did it and, you know when I was setting out I thought about being rich and Plath is somehow giving permission for me to aspire to this, and would never imagine doing it if it weren't for them. So, I think I'm that generation that tried to do it all, you know the super mother generation. And sure it's been tough. I couldn't have done it without a husband who was 100 percent in there as well, and we've always completely shared the raising of our children and the running of our home, and there's been great equality there, and yeah -- the fact that he was a good feminist made all the difference.

Rubin:

I have no doubt.

Tall:

Yes.

Rubin:

Let me ask you about your -- you -- did you -- I get a sense from what you have said that you had a renewed commitment to poetry in the last several years leading up to "Summons."

Tall:

Yeah.

Rubin:

Did these poems come in a kind of rush or in a certain period of time? Does "Summons" draw on a kind of unified period of time?

Tall:

Yeah, I don't know. It -- sometimes it's amazingly difficult I think, and has -- is a stress that we've -- sort of don't understand the full impact of, but you know it's the generation before me who are the real heroes. I mean they're the ones who really broke through and did it and, you know when I was setting out I thought about being rich and Plath is somehow giving permission for me to aspire to this, and would never imagine doing it if it weren't for them. So, I think I'm that generation that tried to do it all, you know the super mother generation. And sure it's been tough. I couldn't have done it without a husband who was 100 percent in there as well, and we've always completely shared the raising of our children and the running of our home, and there's been great equality there, and yeah -- the fact that he was a good feminist made all the difference.

Rubin:

Some of the poems seem to refer to the island in fact.

Tall:

Yes, a few of them do. Although some of them were written more recently, yeah. But the -- my new manuscript has been written very quickly. I do feel absolutely in a kind of great explosion of poetry the last few years, and writing a lot.

Rubin:

I don't want you to explain it away. Do you have any sense what the source of this explosion -- what the source is?

Tall:

I'm not sure, you know? Maybe being done with some prose books and just giving it my full attention, maybe being in middle age, the times. For some reason I have felt very inspired and committed to poetry again, and I love it. It's delightful.

Rubin:

How or when are you writing?

Tall:

Yeah, mostly -- the most of my writing gets done in the summer, I have to say. Because being a parent and a fulltime teacher and editor does not

give you a lot of time to daydream, as you know. And I often begin poems when I'm commuting in the car. I love -- I drive through the country, an hour each way, and I do a lot of my best thinking -- and I take notes. Sometimes I can't get those poems going until the next summer where I take all my journals and see what it was I was thinking about. I mean sometimes they have such pressure that I stop everything and I'm irresponsible and stay home for a day and write, but by in large the best of the writing happens in the summers.

Rubin:

And you're talking -- it's interesting because you're talking about taking journals you continue to keep.

Tall:

Yeah.

Rubin:

You published this collection of excerpts from poets notebooks, obviously it interests you and you still are a person who regularly keeps a journal, and then you'll go back sometime later in the summer, go through, see what actual lines, threads of feeling and thought --

Tall:

I'll often find -- I mean this may sound strange, but I'll find I'll have a bunch of fragments that I -- things I jotted down over a month and that as I'm doing it I don't know what I'm thinking about really. I just have this sensation, or an instinct, for something. And it will be many months later when I'll sit down and flip through and say, "Oh!" you know, "What I was thinking about those five or six days -- now I see how they all come together," and then develop the poem up from those fragments.

Rubin:

Of those fragments -- actually you'll start with them. And since you have a sense of the kind of aesthetic you're working with, the poem finds its form. You don't usually have to fight it into shape or --

Tall:

Absolutely. No, I let it emerge that way. And you know that's why a lot of them are in the short lines and short stanzas because that's the way I've been thinking lately.

Rubin:

I don't know if the reading you've done here exemplify how, I think, brilliantly imagistic a poet you are. When you use imagery I think [inaudible].

Tall:

I guess I am a very much imagistic poet. Yeah.

Rubin:

How important is music to you?

Tall:

Very. I mean, that's the thing. The power of the imagery, and the language in the music held in the language, that's where my loyalty is, you know that's what I love and really aim for and what I hope for in the poems. And I really feel, especially recently, that I'm starting from the music up. You know that it's -- there are phrases or words that I know I want to work with, and that the poem emerges from that preoccupation, rather than going in, you know like Yates, with your paragraph planned, you know what you're doing. I really don't know what I'm doing when I start. I'm really going by instinct with the sound and a couple of images and I'm working with those and discovering the shape and the subject.

Rubin:

Will you write, if you have a chance to do this, say in the summer, will you find yourself writing for hours at a stretch.

Tall:

Oh, yes, with great pleasure.

Rubin:

With great pleasure, poet's pleasure. Now I'm not trying to put an obstacle or a hurdle in front of you, because I'm a great admirer of your work, as is clear.

Tall:

Thank you.

Rubin:

But the way you describe what you're doing, seems to me, a bit out of keeping with what is, perhaps might be called fashionable at the moment.

Tall:

Absolutely.

Rubin:

And we're in a highly discursive age, not a reticent age.

Tall:

I know.

Rubin:

We're not even in a time when lyric poetry is -- seems to be all that valued for the intrinsic qualities of language, subtlety, music, the things you referred to.

Tall:

Exactly.

Rubin:

Does that -- how do you feel about that?

Tall:

I think though that that's coming back. I mean one of the lucky things I -- that I have access to as an editor is I see a lot of young poets, and I'm excited by what some young poets are doing.

Rubin:
That's good.

Tall:
Yeah, I really am excited. But yeah, I am very stubborn about being unfashionable. You know I'm bored by poems that just tell a story, that rely on the anecdotal overly and are overly autobiographical. I just think we can do so much better, you know and I -- you know of course there are times I want to tell a story, and there's some poems in the new books that, you know I've -- where I've got a good story and I really want to tell it, you know and give myself to that. But more often though my mind works more meditatively and with just a real love of unusual language, not the vernacular of -- sometimes it is vernacular, but I'm willing to use, you know a difficult word or a strange syntax to get an effect, to kind of unsettle our usual expectations because the language is so corrupted, you know? It's so corrupted by the governments, by commerce, advertising, that I think we need to be shaken up. We need to be thrown off somewhat when we're reading poems to really get to something with any kind of authenticity.

Rubin:
Yeah, the memoirist and essayist Richard Rodriguez, you know his work, who was here recently, said something that you recalled to me, to my mind. He said that, "We have plenty of stories." "We don't have enough meanings. That was his response to the notion that everything is a story and should be a story. That struck me as exactly right at the time. No problem finding stories everywhere.

Tall:
Exactly. But how are you going to make them memorable and to speak to you, to signify in some way. Yeah.

Rubin:
Now, how is your new work that you've made me so excited about by just describing how it's taken you -- your vital energy? How does it seem to you to be going? How is it different or -- from -- or taking off from "Summons?"

Tall:
Well, it takes off from some of the newer poems in "Summons." So, there's more of the very short lines, the very reticent, concentrated poems. But it's much -- the new manuscript is much thematically tied than "Summons" is.

Rubin:
How?

Tall:
Because it's -- obviously because it's written in a shorter period of time, but also that I feel very focused on a certain kind of poem and I guess it's the poem I would say of middle age, of the turn of the millennium, and everything that's happened in the last couple of years. It's not explicitly about September Eleventh, but for two years before

September Eleventh I had the sense of existing in a kind of aftermath for some reason. You know, there's a kind of retrospective feel to it and a sense of post apocalypse and so then September Eleventh is just kind of confirmed that in a spooky way for me because I felt psychically already there for some reason.

Rubin:
Some center of meaning.

Tall:
Some sense of grieving.

Rubin:
A center does not hold.

Tall:
Just a sense of grieving that something had past. You know maybe it's just age. But also coinciding with the end of the twentieth century and a kind of pessimism about the twenty first. And so it's -- the book really revolves around it.

Rubin:
It's kind of pessimistic period, but maybe that's our point of you. There's so much celebration of technology, a booming economy for a while at the end of it.

Tall:
Yeah, I never bought that. Yeah. Poets don't tend to buy that too much.

Rubin:
No, poets shouldn't buy too much probably. I wonder what -- before we take up for a few minutes -- new manuscript -- I wonder if you could read a really happy, celebratory poem, "For David Constellated," the last poem in the book.

Tall:
Oh, sure. That's my --

Rubin:
It's really I guess a love poem.

Tall:
My only love poem in here, yeah. Because I'm kind of reticent about that too, but yeah.

Rubin:
It's kind of a dark book in many ways, thematically, and you end with this --

Tall:
I did end intentionally with that.

Rubin:
-- First celebratory piece.

Tall:

Yeah, I did end with that intentionally. Yeah. And as affirmation, it's a love poem to my husband and it's called, "Constellated." Oh, and I guess I should say that the -- it was sparked by the coincidence that we're both Pisces. Right, so I was hearing something about the stars and Pisces on the radio and took off on it.

"Constellated:"

Head to foot in a firmament of blankets, our bellies bursting stars,
seven degrees northwest of -- Mira the Wonderful, in the heart of Pisces
I found us.

That double star, Alrescha, that ties the knot of the fish's tail,
seen as one by the naked eye, but in truth a 700 year long do-si-do.
Love owes its safety to our patience.

Or call it gravity, what keeps us dancing in our wobbly orbit, pale green
and blue

in the home of loaves and fishes.

My shimmery one, my principle of attraction.

Dreamers wish on us.

We are the cord that binds.

Self-luminous, we cannot be blown off course.

We cannot be blown out.

Rubin:

Very nice.

Tall:

Thanks.

So, it works with the double image of the tales and it turns out there's
this double star in the middle there and that they're revolving around
each other. I love that image.

Rubin:

This is actually grounded on, in a sense, an actually astronomy.

Tall:

Yes.

Rubin:

A lot of your work has a sense of science under it.

Tall:

Oh, does it? Sometimes.

Rubin:

Where you don't -- essentially you're not inventing the world.

Tall:

Right.

Rubin:

You're responding to the factual, natural world.

Tall:

The factual. Yeah. I don't have a great scientific mind, but I, you know immediately jump to that as metaphor of marriage, you know the notion of the double fish and the double star -- the revolving around one another and how --

Rubin:

It's lovely and I'm sure David appreciated the poem too.

Tall:

Thanks.

Rubin:

This may not be one you showed him in draft. I don't know.

Tall:

I'm not sure. Yeah. I think I was a little further along.

Rubin:

I was taken by how you read it. Again, you stuck to your lineation. "We cannot be blown," and you paused. "Off course. We cannot be blown out." What does that pause do?

Tall:

Oh, for me, I really like to calibrate both the rhythm and the grammar, you know and I repeat the word -- that word twice, right? "Blown off course," "blown out." And I -- so I didn't want to put them both at the end of the line, certainly. And I wanted the interruption, "We cannot be blown." Of course there's a sexual pun there too because of the position in the bed. "We cannot be blown off course," and then, "We cannot be," and I wanted that hesitation there, "blown out."

Rubin:

We cannot be is kind of a loaded line.

Tall:

Right, you get the little -- a kind of irony there.

Rubin:

So, what I'm wondering is; this voice that flows at its own rhythm, is this an internal voice when you're working, say a notebook? Do you have that internal rhythm going and you're matching it?

Tall:

Yeah, that's what I do. And you know I think the longer line poems, in some ways, were written by not listening to my own voice.

Rubin:

By not -- so it's not the speaking voice at all, as you said at the beginning.

Tall:

No.

Rubin:

It's not colloquial; it's not what you're trying --

Tall:

No.

Rubin:

It's not what you're trying -- it's not writing for the broadest possible audience or for even an audience.

Tall:

No, it's very meditative.

Rubin:

The way Freshman Comp tells you to write.

Tall:

Exactly. But I think, you know the ones that I try to write as sonnets, I think that was, you know my education making me try different things, which was fine, I learned plenty from that, but I think I was really violating the voice that had been there from the start. You know the person who had fallen in love with Cummings, you know or that charged language, used unconventionally --

Rubin:

Cummings is the [inaudible] he's not only very serious and original, but he's -- one finds, as you have found, he's a continual source of encouragement for younger poets. Poets always find him, or they find Kerouac, as a writer [inaudible].

Tall:

Exactly, because they break rules. They're attracted to the fact that he breaks rules you know. But I just loved the charge of language and lineation. And I actually began as a musician. I was a serious musician.

Rubin:

What was your instrument?

Tall:

Piano. And I think it was his musicality which really got me. Although, you know he often uses a kind of iambic line too, you know. You may break it but --

Rubin:

You don't play with space very much on the page though.

Tall:

The new manuscript I do. Yeah.

Rubin:

[inaudible] just to be in here. Give us some sense of the new manuscript.

Tall:

Well, I am all over the page in the new manuscript. I decided --

Rubin:

You've got it here; I mean you could actually hold it up to show.

Tall:

I've got it, yeah. Alright, I can show you something I'm doing.

Rubin:

Say, you were students looking this at a later time. How you're writing, you've got this attractive ribbon.

Tall:

I've got these long -- some long new poems, they're longer than before. Let me see. Where's the one I'm looking for? And I've been using the whole page a little bit like Williams with the triadic line, but more -- but I'm not really thinking of it as lines. I'm thinking of, I guess, the page as a kind of field, as something that I can experiment with in terms of the pacing of the poem. So, here's a first page of a poem I'm working on.

Rubin:

So, there's a bit of --

Tall:

Yeah, so I'm, you know I'm breaking the lines and really thinking of using -- sometimes there are single space between lines, sometimes double. I'm trying to be little more sculptural perhaps.

Rubin:

Could you read just a bit of this or is that not going to work?

Tall:

Yeah, well --

Rubin:

Gives us a sense of the voice in this.

Tall:

Okay.

Rubin:

You said it's thematic. What is the thematic thread or focus?

Tall:

Aftermath.

Rubin:

That aftermath thing.

Tall:

I think the title's going to be "Afterings."

Rubin:

"Afterings."

Tall:
Which as an antique word.

Rubin:
Are they discreet poems with titles?

Tall:
Yeah. They are and they don't all exactly go with that, but this poem I just showed you is a new one. I was in Turkey in the spring. I was invited over there. I had a wonderful time and I got to go into the harem at the Topkapi Palace of Istanbul, which I became obsessed by. It was just an extraordinary place. I mean the lushness, the beauty, and yet the terror of it. You know that it was essentially a house arrest, and the cruelty that went with it. I was trying somehow to find a way to express that extraordinary beauty and lushness at the same time with what -- the cruelty that lay behind it and so I -- that's what I'm working with here and really loading in lots of information and detail and lots of images. It's a long poem though so I don't know if that will work.

Rubin:
Is there a way you could give us a feeling for the voice in this?

Tall:
Okay, yeah.
I'll read the first part.

Rubin:
And you'll wet our appetite for what's coming.

Tall:
Okay. It's called "Suralia."

[assumed spelling] Millennia of ingenuities led to this sculpted hot
house warren.
Latticed light, stippling marble floors, zones of separation
where women navigate the dust swum air.
The idle hours flop fed, immured, on hold for a plumed nod, drifting the
intricate doldrums
of boudoirs, adept at bathing, dressing in hierarchies of silk, kidnapped
finery, spoils,
bestowals, drenched in rows, ambergris, virtuoso with aphrodisiacs,
calligraphic bouquets,
flower women, women flowers inclined to opiates.
Propped cushions protected, forbidden by millennia of ingenuities in how
to inflict pain.

And then the poem goes on to talk about the eunuchs and, you know and the
kinds of cruelty that lay behind it, but you know I'm trying to layer in
a lot of images and sensation of the lushness.

Rubin:
Very sensuous.

Tall:

Yeah, I'm trying to get that sensuality, which is extraordinary in the harem.

Rubin:

While you're commenting on it and it in a kind of deconstructed way or critical way. It does point to something at least worth noting, since we don't have time to explore it, for all the reticence and immediacy of the poems you've been writing before, you are certainly aware, as you've alluded to yourself, of world events, they're not out of your mind and yet they're not in your poems.

Tall:

Oh sure.

Rubin:

Your poems are not denials of the political world, but they're something else.

Tall:

No, I mean they're poems. In the Gulf War -- there's a Gulf War poem in "Summons" as well as a Bosnian War poem. They're there, but they don't take center stage. I do have a September Eleventh poem in here, which I can read later tonight.

Rubin:

Let's see.

Tall:

Yeah, but it's not about September Eleventh. You see I'm not willing to engage that head in in the language of journalism. I mean all of that's been too much said. You know I think a lot's been said and if one is going to write an authentic response it's going to have to come very much in a personal vein. And I had to do it in my way of doing things and so I have with that kind of tact and indirection. You know, again, risky, but you know that's what I have to do anyway. Yeah.

Rubin:

Well, you've explained what the new collection's possible title, "Afterings" comes from. How does "Summons" get to be the title poem of the last collection?

Tall:

Of that book? That didn't come until very late in the process. I was looking for a title and I suddenly realized that that word, the word summons, which has several different connotations, and actually both a verb and a noun, I understood that it would unify the book for me. And I think of it as -- I think of the summons that we get from a court, to bear witness, to testify, that was -- there was something of that in the book, you know but I also thought -- what we were talking about at first, that I go out into nature sometimes and I feel summoned. I feel that there are spirits out there that are summoning me to respond. So, that was part of it. And then I also felt that I was summoning the dead because it's a book in which there are elegies, not only for my father,

but for a very dear friend who died. The title poem is for a dear friend who died of cancer. And I feel that I'm summoning them back often in the book. So it -- that word seemed to unify for me the several types of poems that were in there. I think there's an early poem in there, "Household," about, you know a man coming to the door and knocking. And I felt, yeah, it's that being called out of the ordinary, you know and having to suddenly own up to who you are that really fascinated me and it seemed in some ways to unify the book. So, that's where I came up with that title.

Rubin:

Well, I think it's a good way for us to end this discussion.

Tall:

Good.

Rubin:

Break it off.

Tall:

Thanks.

Rubin:

Abandon it, like a good poem.

Tall:

Okay.

Rubin:

Rather than maybe conclude it.

Tall:

Yeah.

Rubin:

And I wonder -- I was going to ask you in fact to read, "Spirit" at the end, but I'm wondering if, "Final Elsewhere" might make a nice ending.

Tall:

Oh, I love that poem actually. Thank you.

Rubin:

Would you say that it's dedicated to Joseph Brodsky?

Tall:

Joseph Brodsky.

Rubin:

Say something about that and you'll read the poem, and we'll thank you in advance for [inaudible].

Tall:

Thank you. I was lucky to know Brodsky well from when he first was exiled.

Rubin:
From Russia?

Tall:
From Russia.

Rubin:
The Nobel -- became a Nobel Lauriat.

Tall:
Became a Nobel Lauriat later. I met him through the University of Michigan that I was associated with and he came to visit on that island in Ireland. We spent a lot of time there together and I still knew Russian at that point. We talked a lot of Russian poetry.

Rubin:
Where did you learn Russian?

Tall:
In college, I'd studied it, yeah; in Michigan. And so it took me a long time to write this. After he died I was sort of heart broken, obviously, had loved him. And I'm pretty slow to respond to things and it took a long time to get, again not to say the obvious, to really find an authentic way to remember him and it came when I picked up a book of photographs of Saint Petersburg, you know once Leningrad when he was there, but now Saint Petersburg. I'm looking for the title here. Mikhail Lemkhin's book, "Brotsky, Leningrad" is the book that I found and it had a wonderful introduction by Susan Sontag, in which she used the phrase, "final elsewhere" and I loved that phrase. And I had the sense that he's a man who had lived in exile almost his whole life and he was always elsewhere and death was the final elsewhere, you know. So, the images in the poem come from those photographs and also from my memory of him, and then take him to his death at the end. So, I'll go out with that, "Final Elsewhere."

Rubin:
We have too resonant of final poems.

Tall:
It really is [inaudible] final.

Rubin:
Appreciate it.

Tall:

Ends up in the cemetery.
First you must take off your jacket, the civilizing tie must tightrope
across the sky
on a bridge of zeros, see can you staunch the outpour.
Pocket magma, glean, magnetic north, but first you must take off your
glasses.
Turn in your books and cigarettes.

Confess to zeros in headlights and laurel wreaths,
the zero of the sun, even your belated wedding ring.
The heart is an island momentarily bridged.
The cemetery angels welcome you without blinking an eye.

Rubin:

Deborah Tall; thank you. We look forward to your next book.

Tall:

Thank you.