Afterings

Many of these poems have appeared in the following journals and anthologies:

Bayou, Blueline

Cold Mountain Review

Crazyhorse

Gettysburg Review

Harvard Review Iowa Review

ISLE (Journal of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment)

The Kent Collector

Mantis

New Orleans Review

Ploughshares

Poetry Monthly (Beijing, in Chinese translation)

Smartish Pace

Scry!

Writers in the Gallery (University of Rochester Press)



Afterings Deborah Tall

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For my Daughters, Zoe and Clea, and for Rosanna, great friend, great reader

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And I the Aft'rins o' the Earth

From the start she was after compression. It took many forms: syntactic, idiomatic, associative, allusive, elissive. She was after an intensity of tensions, a tension of intensities — it went both ways. Among the poets whose practice mattered to her were Wyatt, Roethke, Brodsky, Heaney, Boland, Plath, Niedecker, McHugh. By the time of *Summons*, her fourth book, eighteen years after *Ninth Life*, she had made density a mode of thinking, far beyond pizzazz and dazzle. Style achieved its purpose through what language-under-pressure revealed.

In her nonfiction, Deborah could mosaic research into an arc of thought, yet even her prose leaned toward lyrical charge. By the time she unlocked the form of her essaymemoir, A Family of Strangers, in the last year of her life, she had mastered the telegraphic paragraph. The distances she traversed she did electrically, eschewing footsteps. Like a skipping stone, she crossed the wide river of familial and cultural silence and the traces of story that could barely be made out. That book came out a mere two months before she died. During the arduous two years of cancer treatment, she, as Melville once said of himself, unfolded within herself.

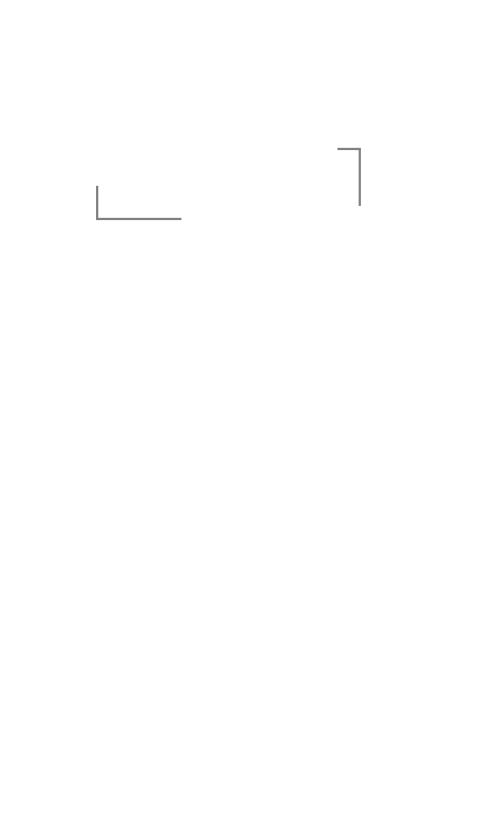
The poems in this final collection were written both before and afterw she was diagnosed. Torque of compression took time to acquire. She wrote slowly. Her method was accretive; she put lines and phrases, things read and speech overheard, into her notebooks and would comb through them, gleaning, aggregating, and adding once she glimpsed the nucleus of a poem and its intentions. She worked first by accumulating and trajectoring, then by concentrating and distilling.

Implicitly, she thought of language and landscape as alike. Both have horizontal and vertical dimensions and

fourth dimensions, too: time, change, the buried. She treated landscape the way she treated language — a terrain to be read; and she treated language as landscape — a topos to be walked and explored. Logos and geo-logos. This last collection of poems was still a work in progress. She needed to walk it more fully than she had time to. At the last, then, she left it to Rosanna Warren and me to do a final editing. Which we've done, lightly. Her final, haunting poem, "10/9/06," we've placed at the start.

She arrived at the title, Afterings, late. You won't find it in the Random House Dictionary of the English Language between afterimage and afterlife, although it has the sense of what lingers on, spectrally, as well as the sense of future life and even life after death, by which she would have meant, I think, the way what's gone continues to haunt the living. She knew, from her island years in Western Ireland and rural years in Upstate New York, that aftermath came from aftermead, mead meaning meadow, and aftermath meaning, originally, second growth - the grasses that come back up from the first cutting. She would also have known Hugh MacDiarmid's, "Or is this Heaven, this yalla licht, / And I the aft'rins o' the Earth?" And from the OED: afterings — the last drops from a cow's milking, which are said to be the richest. Her faith lay in facts like this and in language that preserved such knowledge, which, she might have said, was another word for memory.

David Weiss



10/9/06

How easily they come apart in the end

those inner marbles silently ceding to daylight

swirling their spectral insight

of all that's inner the noisy insides

of the never-seen body asserting its hail and farewell.

I

Man, who invented time, then invented eternity for contrast.

— Marguerite Yourcenar

Auroral

Dew glint and first hint of August's prescient Judas tree

vines still heavy with pumpkin and squash moan of mowers battling weed and the here-again gone-again broadcast of sunflowers.

It's a Wednesday in the ordinary world. There are complaints to answer minor griefs that dent the sky, recruiting shadows.

Night has cleared its throat of thunder. The damp grass dares.

Walk with me quick to the brow of the hill past palings, fevered windowpanes.

Dawn.
The moment it was it was over.

The Odd End of Days

Today, 11/19/99, is the last day of your life that all of the digits of the date will be odd.

The world's apportioned, dressed and named. What's a zebra to a lion? Prey.

What's joy to a raptor? A canceled body part.

We didn't know time's beveled edge would round us off

the nightly hecatomb of limbs be fervor's passport.

From here on we pay our respects to aftermath.

Your Absence Has Already Begun

Say a calling knocks you out of sleep draws blood is accessible only by water.

Say you believe you pilot your life but you have looked away and your absence has already begun.

You grapple out, patched together by medication and makeup, scale the broken

cadence, the frost-heaved lanes walking papers clenched to your chest.

It's late in the season. You forget what lured you: Icarus still tumbling through the stunned stars

his fingerprints all over your heart.