

Waiting for the Song: An Interview with Tim Nolan

By Mary Huyck Mulka

Tim Nolan is a busy man. A litigator at the Minneapolis law firm McGrann Shea, father to three teenagers, husband of 30 years to wife Kate, avid supporter of the arts, and artist himself, I find it amazing that Tim finds time to sleep, let alone time to write a poem. Tim, however, would probably disagree. He would probably argue—with professional precision—that for a poet, poetry is not an idle hobby but a natural facet of daily life. After all, we all find time to blink, don't we? And breathe?

So then, it should come as no surprise that Tim has found the time to write hundreds of poems—and probably has a few stewing in the back of his mind right now. Some of those poems have appeared in nationally renowned journals like *Ploughshares*, *Gettysburg Review* and *The Nation*, and New Rivers Press will release his debut collection, *The Sound of It*, in fall 2008.

Spanning decades of work, *The Sound of It* includes poems written both on the verge of his 50th birthday and when was still earning his MFA at Columbia University, before the thought of studying law had even crossed his mind and when time was not yet a luxury. We glimpse his childhood and watch his own children grow. In “Brussels Sprouts,” we learn that they will only eat this vegetable sliced, with a drizzle of olive oil and a sprinkle of sea salt: “it should be French sea salt— / *La Baleine*—course crystals.” An investigation of the ordinary and extraordinary cycles of life and language, Tim's poems neither waste the readers' precious time nor leave them disappointed, tapping into elemental moments that force a nodding head and a single thought: *Yeah*.

Tim spoke with me on a Wednesday morning in an hour carved out of his day at the office.

Mary Huyck Mulka: What was your initial reaction when you found out *The Sound of It* had been chosen for publication?

Tim Nolan: I was really excited, and relieved in some ways. I've been at this for so long, with little successes here and there, but I don't know how many times I'd sent out a manuscript.

MHM: Has it always been this manuscript?

TN: It has been an evolving manuscript, with 10 or 15 different versions over the years. I'd have poems that for whatever reason I was very attached to—maybe I'd gotten them published—and I'd be writing new poems, so it was unwieldy to put a manuscript together. I ended up getting good help from the poet Jim Moore, who read several of these manuscripts, helping me figure out which poems I should keep for a final manuscript.

MHM: As the manuscript evolved, did you find its themes evolving with it?

TN: I'm not much for themes. I don't think about themes in terms of a connection from poem to poem. In putting together a manuscript, I try to think, *OK, what poems do I like and which poems do I think are good?* Then I move them around until they are in the order that they seem to want to be in. It feels somewhat arbitrary. I could just as easily put them in alphabetical or chronological order. Lately I've noticed that a lot of books of poems, especially first books, have a thematic hook; they might have an underlying story or narrative that goes from poem to poem. That isn't my style. I work on the poem, and if the poem is good enough, gets some attention or gets published, I want to include it. But I don't have an overriding thematic intent.

MHM: You've said that you feel as if you've been writing this book for 25 years. Is that a literal 25 years?

TN: Yes. Some of the poems in the book were written 25 years ago.

MHM: Do you feel they've stood the test of time over the past quarter century?

TN: I don't know if they have or not. There aren't very many of them, but the second section of the book did come from a long poem that I originally wrote while I was in graduate school (at Columbia). It came out of an exercise I did during a weeklong seminar with Robert Hass. He gave us an outline during the first class and said, "Here's what I want us to do by the end of the week." He told us to start the first section writing in the style of a favorite poet. The second section was supposed to be prose written in the style of a favorite prose writer. Then two little companion poems that mirror each other. He suggested all sorts of different things. I ended up writing "Beyond the Sign of the Fish," a sequence of prose and poetry, and little prose poems, about Holy Week, South Dakota (where we went on vacation once when I was a kid), and my childhood in general. It all came together in that week with Robert Hass essentially in the form that it is in the book, although I did change some things—took sections out, did a little tinkering.

The whole sequence was published in *Ploughshares* in 1990, when Rita Dove was the guest editor. That was a big deal for me because it was my first big publication in a good magazine. That sustained me for a long time. I wanted to include it in any book I put together, but at times I felt completely sick of it, that I'd been dragging it around too long. But I think I found a way to have it exist in the book—it doesn't take up too much space or put the book out of balance.

There's one other poem in the book that's at least 25 years old, maybe older. It was the first poem I got paid for publishing. It's called "Elephants at the Airport," and it's a poem that I really worked over. It was in *The Nation* about 25 years ago. I remember being so excited because I got \$50 for it. It was published in the spring poetry section with 7 or 8 other poets, like Galway

Kinnell, Edward Hirsch, all these big shots. And I was right there. It made me think, *Well, I can do this.*

MHM: Because this manuscript has gone through so many incarnations, would you consider it your *Leaves of Grass* to be forever edited and amended?

TN: It's definitely not going to be my *Leaves of Grass*. It's weird with publishing a book—not that I've had any experience until now—but I really do have a sense that I want to set these poems aside and move on. I'm working on a new collection now, and I write a lot. I've developed, not a carelessness, but a sort of confidence in my own ability to write poorly. I write a lot, I don't censor myself, and I don't worry about whether something's just right as I'm initially writing it. Sometimes it comes out just fine, other times it doesn't. Those poems that don't quite work, I don't struggle over them; I just let them go. They cease to exist for me.

MHM: What are you currently working on?

TN: I have another manuscript, but it's not ready quite yet. There are a number of poems in it that I like, but I realized as I put it together that I was arranging it alphabetically by title. I had been scrolling through the poems on my computer with Microsoft Word, and the ones that I liked, I printed out as I went. I'm going to have to change that. So it's a manuscript that's very much in process right now. It's also subject to what I'm working on on a day-to-day basis. Poems will go in and come out—it's not a very logical process. It's intuitive.

MHM: Are you hoping it won't be another 25 years until your next book?

TN: Oh, it won't, and I don't want to suggest that *The Sound of It* took 25 years to get written. Probably three-fourths of it was written in the last 3 or 4 years. What took 25 years was much more boring and uninspiring. The time was spent getting to the point where I was confident in my voice, where I had a voice. Where I'd worked through the tricks that I have—that we all have—and either accepted them or thrown them away. That's what took 25 years. There were many years in there when I was far removed from poetry, but in the last 10 years or so, I've had a fairly intense writing life.

MHM: How do you balance that writing life with your day job as a lawyer?

TN: I know people from outside looking in think of it as contradictory, being a poet and a lawyer, but I don't. I'm the same person. It's not like I put on my lawyer's cap, then I put on my poet's cap. Actually, there's quite a history in America of lawyers being poets, although it might not be as common as it used to be. In the 19th century poetry was published in the newspapers on a daily basis. Many of the poems were often not very good as we look at them now, but many were written by lawyers. Lawyers write, and lawyers are intensely involved with language. It's not so

uncommon for lawyers to be writers, and not just poets. I know several lawyers who, since John Grisham became popular, have it in the back of their heads that they're going to write a legal thriller. Sometimes they do. It's because most writers in the United States today are connected to the academic world that those of us who are not seem unusual. But whether it's as a doctor or an insurance agent or a lawyer, people have to make a living.

MHM: How do your colleagues react when they find out you're also a poet?

TN: Most of them don't care. For most people—and not just lawyers—poetry doesn't exist except when it's needed, when terrible events occur. When there isn't any other way for them to express what they want or need to express, they go to a poem, where hundreds of years earlier a poet said what they are feeling. I do know a number of my lawyer colleagues are proud that I'm a poet.

MHM: In an essay titled "Poetry and the Practice of Law" (*South Dakota Law Review* Vol. 46, No. 3, 2001), commenting on your poem "Oklahoma," which was about interviewing a witness prior to trial, you wrote: "I was the only lawyer on the case who came out of the whole experience with any insight. Whatever insight there is here, it has nothing to do with the case." Do you find that is often the case?

TN: In writing that article I gave quite a bit of thought to what might help me as a lawyer given my interest in poetry and what might help me as a poet given that I'm a lawyer. There are things that run together, especially as a litigator arguing to a jury or a judge. You do have to have a combination of talents not so dissimilar from being a poet. As a poet, you have to be able to tell a story quickly, efficiently, with meaning. Your audience has to have confidence in the truth of what you're saying. I can make things up in poems, but the reader has to have confidence in the underlying truth. That's very much the case in legal advocacy, too. The judge has to buy your arguments. As you develop the facts and figure out the story, figuring out the best position for your client, you discover things along the way that can be helpful if you're paying attention. That's very much like writing a poem. You come to a poem with all kinds of possible words, stories and meanings that you have to commit to, and then tell your story, hopefully in an interesting or entertaining way. And you have to convince somebody of something. There are lots of similarities. If you're trying a case in front of a jury, you have to be poet, playwright, Montessori schoolteacher, explainer and simplifier, and you have to choose your words. All those things are talents that you need to write a good poem, too.

MHM: Do your poetic style of writing and your legal style of writing ever converge?

TN: When I was in law school, my legal writing instructor knew I was a poet, and he used to say, "You're a poet. Why are you so longwinded when you write these exercises for legal writing?" I was so longwinded was because I didn't know what I was talking about. If you don't know what

you're talking about, you dance around. There is that terrible kind of legalese that some lawyers use, but it gets in the way of meaning and communication—it's convoluted and pompous. Good legal writing and good poetry ought to share lots of characteristics. They both ought to be simple, direct, convincing, interesting language, interesting sounds. You should be able to read a legal brief out loud and not bore somebody with it. If you can't, then it's not good legal writing. It's the same with poetry. You should be able to read a poem out loud. When I'm writing, I have to hear my poems at some point, even if I'm not actually reading them out loud. I'm listening to the sounds and the way the vowels and consonants work with each other.

MHM: You say you are concerned with the linguistics and mechanics of language, and clearly so with poems like "English," in which you write, "I love this knock-about tongue, its / hard consonants and cracks ... I love the way that English works / on the seashore among the crabs." How do you go about consciously bringing this love of sound and language to the surface of a poem?

TN: I am very interested in sound, the sound of the words, the sound of the line, where the line breaks. I rhyme quite a bit. I don't use a lot of end rhyming, but you can find rhymes buried in my poems. They may be separated by several lines, and sometimes they're not full rhymes, they're slant. Punctuation interests me too, in its service to sound and the reading, the way I'd like the line to be read. A few years ago, I started using dashes to break the line—to make the poem more conversational. We tend to speak in little abbreviated packages and I wanted to duplicate that. I'm not really sure what impact italics have on my readers, but my sense is that they cause a kind of unconscious drop into meaning. They are a mark of emphasis, almost like *Do you believe this?* But I also recognize that I'm sometimes too fussy about it.

It's all related to the music of the poem, but I'm not very conscious about it as I'm writing. It's present, but I don't think, *Oh, I'm going to use assonance here, or consonance... Now I think I'll drop in a long "e" sound here.*

MHM: Is it in your editing process, then, that you go back and refine the sounds?

TN: Yes. There's so much to learn when you're writing, even if you've been doing it for awhile. One thing I've discovered in recent years is that taking stuff out is almost always the right thing to do. As a general rule, the more you can take out from a first draft, the better—even if that means deleting a whole line or stanza. What I'm doing in a first draft is trying to figure out what it is that I want to say, and I include every step of that process. But a good reader or listener gets bored with having every step laid out, so by taking needless words and lines out, I can create a kind of a mystery that isn't there if I leave the word in. It's more exciting for the reader or listener because they can supply the connections, and if they're a good reader or listener, they will supply them in a more satisfying way than if I had done it for them.

MHM: You've said you consider your work "accessible and entertaining" and that you "do like to get a laugh from people." Do you think more poets should take this stance, moving away from more obscured and inaccessible styles of poetics?

TN: I think there's an opportunity for creative writers and poets to be more accessible to the general reader. I don't mean that we shouldn't be writing about complicated things, but none of us have much time for anything. I believe there should be an element of—*entertainment* sounds too crass—but of generosity, sympathy and mutual respect for the fact that none of us have time. The writer should be doing his or her best to get something across in the best way so that it resonates with the reader. When I pick up a literary magazine, I'm often bored, flipping from the poems to the stories to the literary criticism. I wonder, *For what purpose was this written?* Often the approach is too academic. There are wonderful writers teaching in MFA programs and doing great work, but there's a lot of pressure to publish in the academic world, and I sometimes think the poems I'm seeing in literary magazines have an ulterior, academic motive. Because I'm a lawyer, I retain my amateur status as a poet. I have taught a little, and I've enjoyed it, but if I made my living at it, I think my writing would be impacted.

MHM: For the worse?

TN: I think so. I wouldn't say I've avoided teaching, but the danger for anyone earning an MFA is that they're spending a lot of money and time on it, but maybe aren't so realistic about what they're going to get out of it. When I look back on it, the thing I got from my MFA, which was very valuable, was confidence—a sense that I belonged, that I could do this. What I didn't get from it was any sense that a career was laid out before me. But I'm glad that's the way it worked out. I think there's a danger of mixing up your job with your avocation, what really matters.

MHM: After earning your MFA, had you always planned on going to law school?

TN: No. I didn't know what my plan was. I thought, *Gee, I'll go work for a publisher, I'll be an editor* (my wife and I lived in New York at the time). But we decided to move back to Minnesota, and becoming a lawyer was really just a result of a lack of imagination. I knew I had to make a living and I didn't think I would be able to make a living—well, I *knew*—I wouldn't be able to make a living writing poetry. I wasn't particularly interested in teaching, so...

MHM: Why not law school?

TN: (laughs) Yeah.

MHM: Would you consider yourself a poet first?

TN: Yes, I would. And I'd like to think that I'm a better poet than I am a lawyer, but I'm a pretty good lawyer. My day in, day out interest is in writing poems and in trying to say things the best way I can. What really excites me about writing is the process of self discovery, although that sounds kind of corny. If it becomes habitual to always have a notebook in your pocket and a pen, you can catch things that might not seem to matter—and maybe they don't matter—sometimes they do. I can't think of any other art form that's so perfectly suited to catching things that people don't normally pay attention to, slowing down people and slowing down your own perception. If you're focused on something, it has lots of meanings and reverberations. It can be a scene, a landscape, something you see beside the road when you're out walking—the source can be anything. The real value of poetry for the writer and reader is in having your personality, memories, body and voice all be the instrument of something. What you see, observe and feel is all working on you through the language in a way that can preserve it in this ephemeral little machine of a poem. Edward Hirsch talks on this, too, about the value of poetry and how intimate it is. It exists in the mouth and the throat and the tongue, and the reader hundreds of years later is saying these same words and thereby reenacting the writer's intention. It's a kind of magic. Our individual language—the way we speak and the way we hear—is so individual, it's like you're catching the soul's music in writing. But you have to keep yourself in a receptive state for it to happen. Sometimes when I'm writing it's almost like a trance state.

MHM: What do you do when the music doesn't seem to be coming?

TN: I'm hardly ever stuck, but sometimes I sit down with a notebook and think, *Oh, I'm so sick of everything, I don't want to write about anything.* I might imagine poems that I would like to write and jot down the titles. I might write down 10 or 15 titles—no details, no images, just a title. Wouldn't it be nice to write a poem called "Apple"? I'll write that title down. Usually I don't write the poem. I have a bunch of titles all over the place in my notebooks, but sometimes I do go back and say, *Oh yeah, I want to go back and write that poem called "Apple."* For me, it's like taking notes on something that I haven't quite thought through yet. I can always write—I don't believe in writer's block. I have never experienced it. I think writer's block is where you are going through a period when everything's empty, you don't feel like you have anything to say. We all go through those periods, but even when you don't have anything to say, you can say *that*. You can always say *something*.

MHM: Is this the lawyer coming out in you?

TN: Well, lawyers are always able to say something, but I don't have much patience when people say they can't write anything. You can always write badly. You can write something you hate. Writing a bad poem has a lot of value. Maybe not to anyone else, but to you it will. If you're a writer, you don't have a lot of time and you don't have many ways to make an impact, especially if you're a poet. You need to have writing become something that's so natural that you feel like you're not yourself if you haven't written in a few days or if you aren't thinking about writing.

You just have to *do it* because—and maybe this is part of getting older—everything goes so quickly. My wife and I have three kids, which accelerates that sense. Yesterday they were babies, today they're teenagers, and I can't explain what happened in between. It's gone so fast. That's the starting time for poems, in some ways: There's not enough time, and I love this life; there's not enough of it, so here's how I'm going to express my love of what I'm seeing and feeling. For me, that ought to be the starting point for setting pen to paper. But it takes a long time to see it like that. It's not so much working on poems that gets you to realize it, but more like getting knocked around a few times, being disappointed and being lonely with your work—feeling like it doesn't matter and feeling like it's the most important thing in the world—feeling those two contrary things at the same time.

MHM: You say you write for “people like me who are busy with other things in their lives as they try to sort through the meaning of their experience.” What would you like these people to take away from *The Sound of It*?

TN: I don't know. I like to make people laugh if I can. I like to surprise, and humor is often a good way to put people at ease—something more serious can be accepted and felt once the ice is broken. I like that when it happens for me in a poem, when I can say something totally goofy and pull it back to something meaningful and serious. I love Chekhov. He's always funny. His plays aren't tragedies, they're comedies. Nobody ever dies in the end. Chekhov's plays are full of a sense of sadness, the ethereal nature of things, the disappointments and regrets we all experience. *We never did get to Moscow*. I like the very human and beautiful way that Chekhov enacts regret and disappointment. It's so close.

I would just like people to enjoy my poems and have them mean something, but I'm not sure what. Something like what they mean to me.

Recommended Reading

With American poets it begins with Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman. I'd include Lincoln as a poet, then Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost, George Oppen, Robert Creeley, James Wright, W.S. Merwin, Louise Gluck, Tom Lux and Robert Hass. Current—Tony Hoagland and Michael Palmer. Old folks—Shakespeare, Donne, Keats, Yeats, James Joyce (I was really influenced by him). International—Pablo Neruda, Cesar Vallejo, Tomas Tranströmer, Zbigniew Herbert, Wislawa Szymborska, Czesław Miłosz and Adam Zagajewski (I like Polish poets). There are many, many more. –TN