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A Family's Secret History

A review of *A Family of Strangers* by Deborah Tall
(Sarabande, 2006)

Deborah Tall begins *A Family of Strangers*, her “lyric essay-cum-memoir,” by measuring life’s certainty against its mystery. On the first page, she lists “What I know”; on the second, “What I don’t yet know.” Then she attempts to bridge the gulf between the two. Hers is a strenuous effort, often painful, and since it leads to much less than full knowledge, the story of her search becomes the story of this book, as we watch Tall struggle, with what meager knowledge she can gain, to unlock a family history that has been kept from her deliberately.

The past she wants so desperately to open belongs to her father—the same man responsible for closing it off. Even by the memoir’s conclusion, Tall won’t fully understand the choices that led him—a radar expert who worked on the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System and who could disappear for months at a time—to hide so much of himself and his roots. He seemed strangely perfect for his highly-classified occupation because, first at home and then at work, he was a steadfast and dedicated secret-keeper.

Tall’s drive to know her family’s past began early. She describes herself as a precocious girl asking her father and mother about their childhoods, relatives, and histories; but she was always met with kind, if not impatient, rebuffs: “It would have mystified my parents that I recall my seemingly happy childhood as webbed by secrecy, silence, and lies.” Eventually she realizes her curiosity is no match for her parents’ resolve and understands that the hidden emotional stakes must indeed be high: “A spoken truth could fracture his defenses, harm him, disarray the entire family. His past should be allowed to shrivel away in a white shimmy of mirage.” Her desire to work into this secrecy requires great patience.

The form of Tall’s memoir may be its most remarkable feature. The judicious use of white space and spare, isolated sentences creates a startlingly quick pace for a book chronicling a painstaking

ing search of more than twelve years. Other memoirs have made similar use of short forms: Abigail Thomas's *Safekeeping* and James Richardson's *Vectors* are both celebrated for the cumulative effects of their vignettes and quick stories, charming, surprising, and philosophical by turns. *A Family of Strangers* works to a significant extent precisely because its form seems so essentially connected to the experience it describes, with bits and pieces of evidence always leading her on but never adding up to a resolved story. Tall refers to the "trail of crumbs I've scattered, this effort to make of us a story," as a way to suggest that in following her father's secrets, the path she takes (and leaves behind) transcends the importance of any single destination.

Tall has published four volumes of poetry, so it's no surprise that each page here is a distillation of arresting honesty in sharp, observant language. But more than that, the way the reader progresses through the book actually begins to mimic the piecemeal search itself—one scrap of her family's uncovered identity leading somehow to the next. With headings on nearly every page, like "Anatomy of History," "Evidence," and "Dream of Family," Tall conducts also her evolving meditation on the nature of memory, its enigmatic origins and far-reaching implications. She includes other voices in her search—Susan Sontag and Elie Wiesel, lines of poetry from Eavan Boland and Theodore Roethke, domestic advice from the 1950s magazine *Housekeeping*. Tall allows this outside material to merge with her own voice to create the impression of a searcher who has looked *everywhere* for all the shreds of her past that she can uncover.

After her father's death from a rare cancer, Tall's search gains momentum, first when she finds an old shoebox stashed in a closet, and then when she tracks down distant relatives who are complete strangers to her but grew up with her father. Scenes with her newfound elderly half-uncle in Washington, D.C. and at her grandparents' gravesites in a Queens cemetery are among the book's most poignant. Her search eventually reaches Ladyzin, a small village in what is now Ukraine. Even if the far-flung relations she meets never resolve her mystery, the emotional power of her discoveries is always clear. By the memoir's end, she has traveled to Ukraine and met the oldest surviving member of a family almost completely severed from her, and yet the search hasn't culminated in the peace she

originally imagined: “I run my hand through native soil, but nothing more can be seized, revealed, or explained. In the end, there is just the having come. This place is part of me, but it is not me. Any reflection of myself is distorted, rendered cubist. I am composed of fragments, ragged as the shattered edges of these gravestones.”

Tall died of breast cancer in October 2006. The diagnosis came just after she considered her search finished: “It’s as if having completed my mission, my life is no longer necessary.” Her cancer seemed another painful legacy inherited from her father’s hidden bloodlines; on the memoir’s final page, she worries that her daughters will endure their own “legacy of absence and yearning.” But as this hauntingly beautiful memoir closes, Tall seems to find some comfort in leaving her children this “trail of crumbs”—evidence of a missing family, partially recovered. And because she captured her journey with such intimacy and innovation, this reader feels as if he can share that comfort.