

Recall This Book
Episode 102
Sassan Tabatabai (EF, JP)
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Elizabeth Ferry: Greetings everyone and welcome to another episode of *Recall this Book*, I am Elizabeth Ferry, hello, and I'm here with my most distinguished colleague, John Plotz from the English Department. Hello John.

John Plotz: I'm also your least distinguished colleague.

Elizabeth Ferry: Ok.

John Plotz: Hello.

Elizabeth Ferry: And we're delighted to welcome our friend and colleague Sassan Tabatabai is master lecturer in world languages and literatures and core curriculum. He's a poet, a translator, an editor and a scholar of medieval Persian literature. And he's also, as I discovered in doing a little bit of online research, a pugilist. So maybe you'll tell us a little bit about that. His work has appeared in *Essays and Criticism*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Literary Imagination*, the *Seneca Review*, *Leviathan Quarterly* and the *Harvard Review*. He's the author of *Father of Persian Verse: Rudaki and His Poetry*, apologies if I mispronounce that, two books of poems, *Uzunburun Poems*, and *Sufi Haikus*. And as I hope we'll have time to discuss at the end of the episode, he's also working on a translation of the book *Bewilderment* by poet and father dear to my heart, David Ferry. So, Sassan, hello, welcome to *Recall this Book*.

Sassan Tabatabai: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah, so we thought in the spirit of other episodes, we'd start by maybe having you read a poem and I picked one which listeners will know is motivated by my interests in rocks and stones, which is called *Firestones*. And so we

maybe kick it off with that. And I don't know if you want to tell us a little bit about the poem before you read it or...?

Sassan Tabatabai: Certainly. The one thing is the Cardiff in this poem isn't England. It's in southern California. It's where I grew up to a large extent. And yes, it's an experience of walking on the beach and at the end of it, it's basically a love poem like most other poems.

Elizabeth Ferry: Awesome.

Sassan Tabatabai: So, here's *Firestones*:

I was collecting rocks on the Cardiff Coast,
A testimony to centuries of silt
left on the shore of sediment pressed into stone:
sandstone, shale, tufa, travertine, jasper, Flint.

There was a stone that knew the sadness of the sea,
that saved its secrets. It was pockmarked with holes
and lay half buried in sand eager to save
the ocean spray, like tears, in its miniature pools.

There was a stone that always rolled in place.
It had rolled round and smooth with each wave
desperately trying to control the tide.

There was a stone that showed rings upon rings
placed by the sea over the years
that kept time for the Pacific.

There are stones that breathed sulfur,
that sparked when they touched.
Unremarkable in luster or shine, they
were the lovers of the ocean, firestones
whose sparks were not dampened by salty waves
(but they only made sense in pairs).

And there was this one, more white,
more brilliant, more polished than any stone.
But it was once upon a shell;

it needed centuries to become stone.
It was a counterfeit Firestone:
it did not breathe sulfur, it could not make sparks.

I traced my steps back along the Cardiff Coast
and the stones I returned to the sands.
The ocean's secrets would be well kept by the stones:
Its tears would be stored in pools,
its tides kept in check,
its years measured in rings.
But love itself I could not leave on the beach.
I kept the firestones.

Elizabeth Ferry: That's wonderful and hopefully we can get a photograph of these firestones because you say that you still have them put it on there.

Sassan Tabatabai: So, something just a note about the stones themselves. So this is something that I think we learned as boy scouts when I was a kid how to make fire with stones. And if you find the flint stones and you hit them against each other, they make a spark if it's dark enough to see. And they also smell like sulfur. And then, when you're looking for these stones there's always, you can always find, something that looks like a really beautiful polished white stone. But then when you pick it up, you realize that's not even a stone that's still a shell. So that, that's kind of.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yes. Yeah, I love the stuff around time. Both, one of the things that feels very compelling about stones is that they are so meaningless or kind of outside of our capacity to engage in meaning, right? So, to say that they only make sense in pairs because they are used by humans, right? To do a certain thing.

Sassan Tabatabai: So, if, if you think about it another way, they actually have a lot of meaning, right? Stones are basically, they've been there forever, right? They will be there forever. I think, you know, long after the, the human being has destroyed the

planet and left. So, in a sense and it's also the sense of, you know, the, the weight they carry, right? The impenetrability of the stone, you know, that for me, is something so solid and, in a way, comforting when it comes to stone.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah, maybe that's probably a better way to say it is, it's kind of like the difference between meaning at a human scale. And then this kind of meaning that's way beyond human scale, right? I mean, keeping time is a form of meaning too. Right.

John Plotz: Well, there is that tradition of the scholar's rock, you know, the Chinese tradition of picking out, that you pick out a rock that is just, it's almost like a, like, it's just immensely creed and filled with holes and then scholars can sit and contemplate it and then you, I think that's the kind of meaning you're talking about where it's a script.

Elizabeth Ferry: Well, it's sort of both. Yeah, I mean, I think stones, riffing, but stones are compelling because they do both at the same time, they both look like a mountain, right? And some of those, those scholar stones or they, the other line I really like in the poem that I wanted to ask you was this list of different words for stones? Tufa, flint, you know, and the kind of almost rolling them around in your mouth, right? But those are also stones that are kind of in a human scale, right? The stone doesn't have any sense of its own name of course.

Sassan Tabatabai: Those stones, I'll tell you I got so carried away with finding stones on the beach. So, I ended up, I remember that summer in San Diego, I ended up finding a, I think it was a national geographic book of different stones, like a field guide. And I was looking at the stones I had, and I tried to match them up with the images and then the names just kind of that, that they developed by themselves and then the, the sounds of the names, was really what, what caught my attention.

John Plotz: So, did you keep lists of names? I think that's something Gerard Manley Hopkins used to do. He used to just like, have variant names of things, like kind of journals full of names, journals, full name.

Elizabeth Ferry: Well, and it's almost like they're clicking against each other in this kind of stone like way you can imagine them. Yeah, it's wonderful. So, great. So maybe I'll shift through our conversation a little bit into thinking about your work more broadly. One of the things that's very exciting about it, and I'd love to hear you talk more, is about the ways that you move between being a literary scholar, a translator and a poet and in the books that you kindly sent to us so we could get to know your work better, you move very seamlessly kind of between these. So, can you just sort of tell us a little bit about your practice and, and how you got there and what you think about these different ways of working?

Sassan Tabatabai: I started translating, with the poet Rudaki, who's a 10th century poet he is the first really the first major poet to write a New Persian, which dates back to around the nine worked with Christopher. I still work with him a lot. I you know, it kind of fit in all the, in all the different national identity theories. And then talking with my advisor about this, the anthropologist Charles Lindholm, he suggested as we were talking during our, you know, our regular meetings, if there was a poet, I could translate because he knew I liked to write poetry that would fit into the theories, and it was a light bulb moment. I said, of course, Rudaki fits perfectly. So that's how I started with the translating.

Elizabeth Ferry: So, the theory being that the development of a vernacular goes along with or helps to make a sense of national identity?

Sassan Tabatabai: Exactly. So, after I started translating, you know, and I, I'd always been writing poems. So that's really when the translating started. And then from there, I started translating different poets, some 20th century poets. And

also, back in the, the classical works. I started, I was teaching some classes, and this is years later when I'm teaching teach a class on Rumi and Persian Sufi poetry. So, I started translating some and yes, before you know, it, it was it was the translations. and then everything started to circle back and then all those translations started to have a real impact on my own poetry and which kind of led to the Sufi Haiku.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah, I think that was a great a great concept, the Sufi Haiku.

Sassan Tabatabai: So as far as, you know, my approach to literature and translating in poetry, it is quite messy and, you know, I might be working on so many things at the same time and, you know, you just roll up your sleeves and kind of take things from here and there and, and see how it goes

John Plotz: Is all your poetry written in English originally or?

Sassan Tabatabai: Well, I think I published only one poem in Persian throughout all these years. So, it's interesting because Persian is my mother language, but English is my first language. So, I feel much more comfortable with English. So, I translate out of Persian. So, my family left Iran when I was in the seventh grade, you know, right when the Islamic revolution was happening. So, my formal education in Persian pretty much ended in the seventh grade.

Elizabeth Ferry: Did you speak Persian in the home?

Sassan Tabatabai: Yes, we still do with my parents. So, the spoken thing is Very different than you know, an actual formal education. But then when I started my PhD and started to read Rudaki a lot of my formal version, I ended up learning from this 10th century poet. And yeah, so I, I wrote one poem in Persian. And then, so again, talking about how, you know, the little circuitous routes to things. I started translating David Ferry or your, your dad's poetry. And that has been eye opening

because I always went in the other direction. I always went from Persian to English, never from English to Persian. And it's been a wonderful experience.

Elizabeth Ferry: Does it feel very different and, and how?

Sassan Tabatabai: Just the, and in a way, it feels very different, but in another way, it doesn't at all because you're still translating and you're translating poetry. So, there's so much more than just conveying the words. You know, it's the music of poetry, it's the rhythms, you know, it's, it's each poem has a particular breathing rhythm, right? If you can breathe the poem in a different language, then that kind of becomes, right?

Elizabeth Ferry: I have another question around translating and, and kind of immersing in these literary traditions. So, along with that comes, I mean, along with any poetic tradition comes a lot of convention, right? Musical conventions, metric ones, different kinds of registers of vocabulary. How do you see that influencing your own writing and can you give any examples or instances where you?

Sassan Tabatabai: Certainly, there's a few poetic forms in Persian that, you know, you read them all the time. It's, it's, it's, you hear them all the time, you know, and it's the, the kind of things that I don't know, my grandfather might have known them by heart, and he would just recite them. You know, my mother might have known them by heart and recite them. And those, it's strange because they kind of infiltrate you, they get under your skin. So, one particular form that I've started writing in English is the form Qazal and it's, it's a very strict form. Translating a Qazal, into a form in English is very difficult, but then I started writing them in English, you know. So, it's the couplets. The first two lines, the first lines of the first couple, there is a rhyme followed by a refrain and then that rhyme and refrain continue in the second line of every couplet to the end, right, a little bit like a villanelle. I have a short one and it is called simply *Qazal*. And the themes are, again, it's the, the kind of mystical

themes that have really, you know, grown on me after teaching the mystical Sufi poetry. So this is *Qazal*:

As a boy, I waited for the smile to appear in you,
Listened for echoes of the sigh I could hear in you.

You are the mirror where I have sought the beloved:
her hyacinth curls, a nod, a wink. A tear, in you

In the marketplace you can learn your future for a price.
They are merchants of fate; I see the seer in you.

What had been buried under the scripture's weight,
Its truth, without words or incense, becomes clear in you.

They who bind you on the altar of sacrifice,
Hide behind masks; don't let them smell the fear in you.

As I approach the house lit by Dawn's blue light,
Step by step, I lose myself, I disappear in you.

Elizabeth Ferry: I love internal rhymes like that. There's something very satisfying about them.

Sassan Tabatabai: It's and the thought about the version, the convention is that they they've usually been compared to a necklace of pearls. So, each couplet is a, is a pearl and but if that necklace breaks and the pearls fall on the ground, you can put them back in any order. And the poem should still like, work.

John Plotz: Is it an old form in English as well? Or is it only recently that people have started to write in English?

Sassan Tabatabai: As far as I know, it's a more recent thing.

John Plotz: I'm just fascinated by those forms that get shared across languages, you know, amazing.

Elizabeth Ferry: Well, that actually one of, I was thinking about the haiku because the haiku is, you know, I've had conversations with other poets around, you know, for instance, the iambic pentameter is, is especially good for English, right? The way English is structured works really well and it, and it kind of allows it to have that sort of tension between that kind of delightful tension between the something that is metrically constrained and something that is imaginative and kind of feels like a free expression. I mean, because, because iambic is a speech rhythm in English. Yeah, that's the argument anyway. I mean, you guys are both more, more literary scholars than me, but I don't know anyone who talks in dactyls, although you're a little bit talking in tag when you say that sentence. And then people say the same for, for Japanese, for Haiku that, that, that, you know, it feels very artful in English to write a, to write a Haiku, but maybe not exactly in the same way in Japanese because it, it sort of flows a bit more or something. What did you, what made you choose the Haiku as the form? And why for this particular, what's the conversation between a Sufi tradition and, and Haiku form?

Sassan Tabatabai: Well, with the Sufi poetry, one of the places where it originates is the Rubai form, you know, made famous by Omar *Rubaiyat* is just the plural of rubai and it's a quatrain - that very terse meditation usually on themes of love and mysticism. And they just really go hand in hand. I was very attracted to that. And then I was part of a Haiku circle at some point at BU where, you know, everyone is sitting around writing Haikus and, and I started, and I think I had just come from the Sufi poetry class and it just struck me that the Haiku is even more than the rubai, right? So it's, wait a minute that that's really lends itself wonderfully to express the kind of mystical themes that we encounter in the Sufi poetry, right?

John Plotz: Why is brevity wonderful for Sufi themes?

Sassan Tabatabai: Well, the reason the poets, the Sufi poets, they, they're all

mystics when they turn to poetry is because they're trying to express some kind of mystical experience which by nature is inexpressible. So, they turn to poetry and when little glimpses of the kind of experience that the mystic is going through, I think it becomes little windows into, into the way they are what they are experiencing, which makes the poet make sense.

Elizabeth Ferry: And is it also maybe the sort of mysticism in the observational because Haiku is also, you know, have this kind of impulse to the almost imagistic, right? Like, this sort of very specifically observational.

Sassan Tabatabai: And also it's something that, you know, you can, you can Not only just recite and just splits, you know, within a few seconds, but it's the kind of thing that if it's very easy to memorize and, but once you memorize it and you repeat it, then that really again ties into the, the, the mystical experience, right? So, there is that sense of repetition on particular words, that sometimes creates the, you know, that trigger the mystical experience.

John Plotz: Can I ask if music fits into that at all? Like, do you think of it as a musical form or?

Sassan Tabatabai: The Haiku? A little bit? I mean, I would like to think my Haiku has music to it. I would like to think all my poetry has music to it, but music is huge with the, with the, with the mystics, right? Again, talking about the inexpressible of the mystical experience very often they turn to music, and this is the kind of thing that comes up in discussions in the class all the time. You know, it's like if you are in conversation with the divine, right? So the thing that comes up all the time is like, what language did God speak to Adam and Eve? Right? And its chances are, you know, it's not gonna be Portuguese, right? So, it's, it's, you know, the, the language of the Mystic in a way becomes music.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah, I like the image of the window too because they are

sort of slightly square too, right? So, it does kind of, there's a sort of visual feeling about a Haiku as well.

Sassan Tabatabai: And it's, you know, the, the, it's interesting to be able to express something in, within the context of the rigidity of the form, you know, so it's just so regularized and it's, it's, you know?

John Plotz: So I have a, this is like a, I if it's gonna come out of a muddled question, but you see if it makes sense to you, there, there's a tradition in English, like when you were talking about your Firestone poem and the, the way it becomes a love poem because you think about the two, you know, the two stones representing, you know, two souls and love. That makes me think of an English language tradition in which poetry is so much about the lyrical, I, you know, like subjectivity. But when you're describing the Haiku, even with the window, there's that sense of you know, there's an impersonal quality to the mystical vision. So how do you square those two? Do you think those two things coexist within poetry or you're sort of always tacking between the eye and the impersonal.

Sassan Tabatabai: It's the I in all the, the Sufi poetry, right? Even my, it's a very interesting thing because it's all about the you and not about the eye. Right? So, and then, you can be understood in different ways. You know, the, you represents the beloved, the, you can be the divine, it can be you know, a person you love. But the ultimate goal is that union of the eye with the you and it is that union in which the eye completely disappears. So, it's in a way, it's, it's looking at two different sides of the coin, right? The whole point is for that you, for the for the eye to disappear, right? There's a little Rumi anecdote where the lover goes and knocks at the door of the beloved. She answers the door and she says, who is it? And he says, it's me. And she says, no, you don't understand, go away. So, he goes away and then the poem tells us that he

cooks in the flames of separation, right? So, he had come to the door with a raw heart, but his cooks, his heart cooks in the flames of separation. And he wonders for years and he goes back to the door of the beloved and he knocks again, and she says, who is it? And he says it's you. And she says, all right now, you understand, right? Well, the ultimate knock knock joke.

Elizabeth Ferry: Well, finally I'd love to, to hear you talk a little bit about a project that I know about through my father, of translating his work. And you, you mentioned, you mentioned that as your kind of first experience of translating into Persian, right? And you know, all these ideas around both the relationship between a, a rigid or constrained form and expression and the music of lines. And also sometimes with my father's poetry, I talk about poetic salvage, right? Because there's always like a bunch of different lines from different things that are almost like a conglomerate rock, right where it's kind of sort of embedded within it. So New England Putting Stone. Exactly. So I, yeah, we, we thought I'd love to hear about that project and then, and then if we could perhaps end our conversation with hearing your reading in Persian of a poem that we've discussed on this podcast before, along with the poet, Roger Reeves, *Resemblance*.

Sassan Tabatabai: With David Ferry I've known him for a number of years. He's in the core curriculum at BU, we taught his translation it was in a way, it started as a way for us to have conversations on the phone, you know, without just rehashing small talk over and over again. So I would translate one in Persian and I would call him and he would read the English and then I would read my Persian and David doesn't understand Persian, but he has such an incredible ear that he would ask me all kinds of questions, you know, and tell me, oh, this works particularly well and I'm really just going on the rhythms themselves. This is *Resemblance*. And *Resemblance* in Persian.

It was my father in that restaurant

on Central Avenue in Orange, New Jersey
where I stopped for lunch and a drink, after coming away
from visiting, after many years had passed,
the place to which I'd brought my father's ashes
and the ashes of my mother, and where my father's
grandparents, parents, brothers had been buried,
and others of the family, all together.

The atmosphere was smoky and
there was a vague struggling transaction going on between
the bright daylight of the busy street outside,
and the somewhat dirty light of the unwashed ceiling globes
of the restaurant I was in.

He was having lunch. I couldn't see what he was having
but he seemed to be eating, maybe without
noticing whatever it was he may have been eating.
He seemed to be listening to a conversation
with two or three others—Shades of the Dead,
come back from where they were to when they went away?
Or maybe those others weren't speaking at all? Maybe
it was a dumb show, put on for my benefit?

It was the eerie persistence of his not
seeming to notice that I was there
watching him from my table across the room.
It was also the sense of his being included
in the conversation around him and yet not.
Though this in life had been familiar to me,
no great change from what had been there before,
even in my sense that I, across the room,
was excluded, which went along with my sense of him
when he was alive, that he often didn't feel
included in the scene and talk around him
and his isolation itself excluded others.

Where were we in that restaurant that day?
Had I gone down into the world of the dead?
Were those other people really Shades of the Dead?
We expect that if they came back

they would come back
to impart some knowledge of what it was they had learned.
Or if this was indeed, Down There, then they
down there would reveal to us who visit them
in a purified language some truth in our condition
of being alive we are unable to know.
Their tongues are ashes when they'd speak to us.

Unable to know is a condition I've lived in
all my life. A poverty of imagination
about the life of another human being.
This is, I think, the case with everyone.
Is it because there's a silence that we
are, all of us, forbidden to cross, not only
the silence that divides the dead from the living
but, antecedent to that, is it the silence
there is between the living and the living,
unable to reach across that silence through
the baffling light there always is between us?
Among the living, the body can do so sometimes,
but the mind, constricted, is inhibited by ancestral
knowledge of final separation holds back,
unable to complete what it wanted to say.

What is your name that I can call you by?

Virgil said when Eurydice died again,
“there was still so much to say” that had not been said
even before her first death from which he had vainly
attempted with his singing, to rescue her.

Elizabeth Ferry: Wow, thank you.

Sassan Tabatabai: Yeah, my pleasure. I'm always so moved by David's poems,
you know, and we have this is part of our column for
conversation, conversation.

Elizabeth Ferry: Well, there's something about hearing it in the two

languages and having it also be about being unable to communicate and trying to communicate.

John Plotz: And that notion that Euridice still has more to say, you know, but there's that, that gap that's always there.

Elizabeth Ferry: And the, and the, the silence, the gap between the living and the dead and antecedent to that between the living and the living.

John Plotz: Yeah, I love that, the point you made about your discussion in class about like what language was God speaking to, to, to Adam and Eve in the Garden, you know, that languages make you aware of those goals.

Elizabeth Ferry: Well, thank you, Sassan. This is a wonderful conversation and we're really looking forward to seeing more of the work and Yeah, thanks a lot and thank you to our listeners.

John Plotz: *Recall this Book* was founded by Elizabeth Ferry and me, John Plotz. It is sponsored by BRANDEIS and the Mandel Humanity Center. Sound editing is by Naomi Cohen website design and social media by Miranda Peery of the English Department. We're eager to hear your comments, criticisms and thoughts. If you like what you hear, please subscribe, rate and review us on Apple podcast or wherever you get your podcast from all of us here at RTB, Thanks for listening.