COMMONPLACE PODCAST

EPISODE #13

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[Music]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Hello, this is Rachel Zucker, and this is episode thirteen of Commonplace: Conversation with Poets (and Other People). When I first started Commonplace, only five months ago, I knew that I wanted to talk to all sorts of people - people I knew well, people I didn't know, people and artists from all sorts of backgrounds with a range of aesthetic practices and preferences, but there was someone I had in mind when I thought about these conversations, someone I've been blessed to know for twenty years, someone I've been talking with about poetry, politics, cooking, love, family, teaching, the weather, sex, sexuality, sports, illness, and so many other topics big and small, someone who is intrinsic to my thinking about art and poetry and to my life as a poet. I'm talking about the magnificent and amazing D. A. Powell.

D. A. is the author of five books of poems: *Tea*, *Lunch*, *Cocktails*, *Chronic*, *and* *Useless Landscape, Or, a Guide for Boys* as well as *By Myself, an Autobiography*, which is a collaboration between D. A. Powell and David Trinidad. Recipient of a National Book Critics Circle Award, A Guggenheim Fellowship, the Kingsley Tufts Award, and many, many other awards, D. A. has taught poetry at Columbia, Harvard, and the University of Iowa and now teaches at the University of San Francisco.

Poet/critic Steph Burt, with whom I spoke in episode twelve, wrote in the *New York Times* about D. A. Powell: "No accessible poet of his generation is half as original, and no poet as original is this accessible." Poet/critic Craig Morgan Teiccher spoke with me about D. A. Powell in episode eight and named D. A. as a poet of our generation whose work will live on long after all of us are gone. In a review of Powell's work, Teicher wrote, "Powell has written some of hell's music, and it's among the best you'll hear." What I am trying to tell you listeners is that if you have not already read D. A. Powell's poems, go get them and read them.

D. A. Powell is a master poet. His poems are both innovative and traditional, and he writes about the intersection, but not the dichotomy, of the spiritual and the banal, the carnal and the metaphysical, the political and the private, the mind and the body. Powell's poems are gorgeous, moving, funny, bawdy. They are full of puns and biblical references, pop culture references and biblical syntax, double-entendres. They are witty and sometimes brutally heartbreaking.

I met Doug in 1994 at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, where we were at school for two years together but somehow never in the same class at the same time. In most ways, Doug--as I called him then and still call him now--and I have very little in common. At the same time, it is in Doug's presence, a relationship that is full of vulnerability and acceptance, that my work is made.

I am sometimes asked if I think about "the audience" when I write. That's a complicated question for me, one that has not stayed the same for me and that depends upon my changing definitions of audience, and I've been asked if I write

for an audience or to an audience. What is very clear to me is that while I do often feel alone, very alone, and that my poems often come out of this loneliness or this solitude, I am not writing alone. I am not sure if I am writing to or for, but I know that I am writing in some capacity with Doug, with this friendship, this listener, this reader, with the support and encouragement of someone I respect, admire, and adore.

I don't know what my work would be like without this twenty-year literary and personal friendship, and my gratitude for and awe of this relationship is part of what made me want to start this podcast. I feel implicated by and included in Doug's poems, even when I know that they were mostly not written for me, or to me, although sometimes they are.

And for me, so much depends upon knowing I can reach out to Doug and ask him if and where and how I've gone wrong, how to keep going, to know that he wants me to keep writing and living and teaching and reaching out. I don't know if that makes him my red wheelbarrow or the rain or the chickens. I don't care. I just know that I'm with him and that's enough. I recorded this episode a week after the election in Doug's office at the University of San Francisco, a few hours before I gave a reading there. Even though I recorded this conversation after my conversations with Bernadette Mayer, Jericho Brown, Alicia Ostriker, and Andi Zeisler, I wanted to air this one next.

[5:29]

When I am with Doug, either when I get to see him in person, or more often as we are, separated by a whole country, him in San Francisco, me in New York, but in conversation via phone, email, letter, or twitter, I feel acceptance and provocation, consolation and outrage, action and the permission to take care, to breathe, to keep moving forward.

There are pauses in this episode that I have chosen to leave in. Often, one or both of us is tearing up or crying, and we both forget, at times, that no one can see us, or

that anyone is listening. At one point, we discuss poems in a big black box that we don't name. This is a collection of poems by Robert Grenier called *Transpositions*.

Links and other information from this episode as always will be available on the commonpodcast.com website. I'm thrilled to announce that Patreon subscribers to Commonplace will each receive a signed copy of Doug's book *Repast*, which contains *Tea, Lunch,* and *Cocktails,* his first three additions. To find out more about how to become a Patreon subscriber, go to our website.

I had envisioned a very different post-election world and a different post-election conversation, but this is what I have to offer: tears, laughter, pauses, poems, conversation, hopefully, a place that you, the listener, can find some safety and comfort and words for your outrage and protest. From coast to coast and all over this screwed-up country, I hope Commonplace can be a book of spells, an action, a form of drop-lifting, a place of outrage and consolation, disturbance and comfort, but this depends on you as well.

Please let us know, on Twitter, Facebook, what you think, how you are. And if your feelings about art have changed post-election; we want you to be part of this conversation as well. Thank you, listeners, take care. Thank you for listening.

[Music]

RACHEL ZUCKER: I just want to say this out loud: I am so disoriented and I think I'm personally disoriented, I'm emotionally and physically disoriented, and I'm clearly not the only one who is disoriented, so in this sense, I feel in good company, but-

D. A. POWELL: Well, we just went on Mr. Toad's Wild Ride. And we came out, and we are blinded in the sun. It's a crazy time.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. I saw you tweet--I can't remember the exact thing you

said--students are asking me “How can I write at a time like this?” and you said, “Well how can you not?”

D. A. POWELL: Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah.

D. A. POWELL: Well, I just feel like--this semester I’m teaching a course in social activism and political protest and poetry, which there’s a long history of, particularly in the twentieth century, but it’s not a historical class. It is a now class, and what we’ve been working on all semester is finding ways to take that poetic energy and put it out into the streets to make ourselves vulnerable and to speak against atrocity, ignorance, hate, all of the things that we feel like poetry provides a buffer against. And so in a way, it feels like what we’ve been doing is having a long training period towards this very moment to say, “Alright, now we’re ready. We have trained ourselves to talk to people who are being aggressive, to interact with people who might be confrontational, and to still take our message out into the world.”

[10:11]

And it is difficult, you know? When I was in Starbucks in my penguin costume covered in Donald Trump dollars, some ex-marine came up to me, and said, “Can I ask you a question?” Which I feel, you know, he already asked me a question by doing that. I'm already on the spot. So I said, “Sure. Sure. Ask.” He says, “What does this mean?” And he not only points at one of the Donald Trump dollars on my penguin costume, but he puts his finger and pushes against my flesh aggressively, “What does this mean?” And I said, “It's a Donald Trump dollar. Apparently it means nothing.” And he says, “Well, I'm not gonna let you get away with that. Obviously, you don't like the guy, right? I want to know what it is you don't like about him?” And I said, “Well, I have zero patience with ignorance.” And he says, “Yeah, well, I hate Islamic terrorism.” And I said, “Well, thank you for your

service." And I started to walk out and he says, "Hey, come back. I'm not the one in the penguin costume."

I was thinking, "No, aren't you?"

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay, wait, but give me the context for--was the penguin costume part of the class?

D. A. POWELL: Well, I mean, it was part of an action that we were doing. We were on our way down to the Transamerica building, to exorcise the demons of capitalism from the heights of this crazy pyramid structure by reciting the second section of *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg, the "Malik" section.

RACHEL ZUCKER: So tell me about the stuff that you did in this class before the election.

D. A. POWELL: Well, the week before, we were down at the 24th Street BART station in the mission, offering people a chance to read a poem, and what we brought where sections of *Citizen* by Claudia Rankine, and once somebody read a section of *Citizen*, then they won the opportunity to take a wiffle bat and take a whack at a Donald Trump pinñata. It was a, not unsurprisingly, very popular activity. We had people from all--I mean, it wasn't just USF students. There were all kinds of people that came up. And some of them weren't even poetry readers. Some of them could barely read. We had homeless people, we had a trans woman who obviously was so moved by reading Claudia Rankine's work, she was visibly transformed. When she took a swing at that piñata, it went sailing down into the BART station. We had to go and retrieve it. She did not break it, but she sent it as far as she could. And she said, "Thank you."

I felt like, that's what poetry should be--an opportunity to work out anger and frustration and sadness that we all feel. It's not enough to just put it in a notebook and close it. In order to really transform your life, you have to open the notebook. You have to put it out.

RACHEL ZUCKER: So will your next book be published with a bat and a piñata? Or can the poems--I mean, you're describing--and I want to hear more about the other actions that you and the class did--but do you feel like poems can be a buffer against atrocity? Can they can they in fact change things without the kind of action that you also brought the poem into, without a penguin costume, without a--

[15:02]

D. A. POWELL: Well, that's why I envisioned this class for this semester. I feel like too often in academia, we write the poem and then what we want to do is dissect it and analyze it and figure out how it works and what's broken and what's fixable. It's like we're approaching it in this very surgical, clinical fashion.

That's really not the point of poetry. Poetry is meant to be written and shared. And there are so many things that poetry can do, but poetry can't change your life. *You* have to change your life. Rilke tells us that "you must change your life." He doesn't mean change your life by reading another poem, change your life by analyzing this poem, or change your life by putting a poem in a magazine.

Poetry is really just the record of the internal struggles of humanity, the difficulties, the pleasures, the joys, the sorrows. And in order to support the life of poetry, we have to be able to be in touch with and act upon those impulses, those emotions. So this is giving students an outlet to say, "You don't have to just write a poem and stick it in your thesis, and worry about pagination, and worry about margins and all of that stuff that we had to go through and graduate school." I'm trying to tell them that's not really the important stuff. Don't fixate on that. Fixate on your life and how poetry is a record of a manifestation of the internal workings.

RACHEL ZUCKER: What are some of the other actions you guys did?

D. A. POWELL: Well, a lot of them were student-designed and student-personeed. So we had, this past weekend, one of our students who's also a very gifted artist,

set up a table down at the Embarcadero and had people making Tibetan prayer flags so that they could write their poems and hang them out in the wind. I mean, it's not just about “How do I keep poetry going for myself?” That's a really petty way to think about poetry. “How do I keep it going for other people?” is much more interesting.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Are these the prayer flags that are outside your window?

D. A. POWELL: Oh, those are somebody else's prayer flags. You know, there's a lot of prayer flags flying in this country right now. Let’s see. Some of our students have been actively drop-lifting.

RACHEL ZUCKER: What’s drop-lifting?

D. A. POWELL: Drop-lifting is the opposite of shoplifting. Shoplifting, you're taking something out of the store. Drop-lifting, you're putting something into the store. So, we've been covering junk food products with labels that say, “Read a book, write a poem.” There have been all sorts of wonderful things that--

RACHEL ZUCKER: And as your class was doing these things, did you feel you were in training for this outcome? Or did you all imagine you were in training for the other outcome?

D. A. POWELL: I feel like we were in training for life. Because life always hands you shit. My own personal view was once we get through this election and have a reasonable and open-minded person in office, then we'll have to work even that much harder. We’ll still be demonstrating; we’ll still be activists. But at least we'll have an ear that we feel is closer to the reality that Americans deserve. We deserve, at this point in history, to not have to be afraid.

[20:15]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. What was the mood if--has your class met since the election?

D. A. POWELL: We'll meet on Thursday. I met with my workshop last night, and it was very somber at the beginning and then we got into reading poems and had a good time. But you know, I was away during the election. I was in Iowa City, which I thought "This will be exciting, watching the election and a battleground state!" But the mood there was really--by the time I got to The Dey House to watch the election returns, the mood was already very grim. And of course, I'm thinking, "These numbers are wrong. The media is just playing this. And when they start actually unrolling all of those votes in Minnesota and Wisconsin and Ohio and Iowa," I thought "It's gonna be like Obama all over again because that's what all indications that we were having access to suggested." So it just shows that the whole system sort of failed, bigly.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Hmm. How does the work change now--if it does change for your class on social activism?

D. A. POWELL: I don't know that it does change necessarily. I mean, we are still working to educate and point out the rise of racism and intolerance and fascism. That work will not go away, sadly.

At the same time, I feel like we're ready. This is what artists do best is--as James Baldwin says, "Artists are here to disturb the peace." And even when we're making a piece of art or a poem for an entirely friendly audience, there must be an element of disturbance in order for people to be engaged by it. And so we're going to have four years in which to exercise our disturbing elements.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Do you feel--I've sort of been saying this, and I have such mixed feelings about it and I'm not even sure I completely agree with it, but I hear myself saying it--that even though I would trade the outcome, I do believe that some very good art will come out of this moment.

D. A. POWELL: Cold comfort.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. Do you think I'm right? I mean, do you think?

D. A. POWELL: Oh, I say absolutely. I think that artists will rise to this occasion. It's just disheartening to be at this crossroads, to feel like all of the progress that we've made as a society is now hanging in the balance. But I'm reminded that freedom is something that people don't just give you. You have to fight for it. And in a way, I feel like the gay and lesbian and transgender students, the students who are people of color, who are from religious minorities that have suffered through persecution are perhaps better equipped in the long run because we've faced this before. We had eight years of Ronald Reagan, we had eight years of George W. Bush. There are a lot of seasoned activist artists in this world, and they know what to do, know how to get the message out there. They know how to change the hearts and minds of civilization. It does happen.

[25:09]

RACHEL ZUCKER: I guess, cold comfort, yes. My hope is that all the many people who have already been fighting this fight and are not surprised – disappointed and horrified but not surprised--by this outcome will be able to also make an alliance with the people who are very, very shocked
and that the people who are very shocked because they have not been in a situation of having to fight this fight on an individual level--they've been doing it conceptually, they've been doing it ideologically, but not personally, not physically--those people primarily have privilege and power. That's why they're shocked because they didn't know what was the reality. Maybe this moment will be a combination of the privilege and power of shocked people and the experience and know-how and wisdom of people who are not shocked. That's my hope.

I think my fear is that everyone has already been fighting for a very long time is exhausted and angry, with all good reason, at people who have privilege and power

and are shocked, and people who have privilege and power are shocked, are in a state of paralyzed despair that's not very useful.

D. A. POWELL: Well, you know, we all have our ways of psychologically absorbing and dealing with unexpected turbulence in our world. So it's going to take some time for people to know where to direct their action and their anger. But we do--right now, there are ways in which we can galvanize people's ideological discomforts.

The North Dakota pipeline, for example, is bringing people to activism who may have otherwise not known or cared about environmental issues because those environmental issues are tied up with issues of place and identity and culture, and I think Americans in particular, are sensitive to the way in which we have completely, completely hurt the native populations who lived in this country before us.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oh, it’s so hard to just look at you.

D. A. POWELL: I know. It's hard to talk.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Nobody can see us but it's just--

D. A. POWELL: Yeah. We just need to get over that feeling of sadness and anger and turn it into action. And I think that, you know, Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren and Rachel Maddow--there are so many people in this world who really are woke to the reality of what this dummkopf administration is going to mean, so we're not going to let them get away with rewriting the Constitution, unless they rewrite The Electoral College portion of it, which, I think is really– it's time. It was a clause that was put in there to protect a culture of racism, and one of the things that I was excited about with Hillary's candidacy was that she was addressing institutionalized racism. That's one of the things that Republicans, particularly the capitalist Republicans, fear most--that they will lose this way that they have of managing and controlling the labor force--

[30:15]

--African Americans, Latinos, Hispanic populations, because we have built this infrastructure, we--this entire country--is responsible for the ways in which we have translated plantation culture into corporate culture, into capitalist culture. And we have enslaved people through debt and through fear and through legislating against certain kinds of drug crimes that we associate with particular communities and not go after other drug--as Abbie Hoffman said, “All laws are political because they are not applied evenly.” And what we have to do is work as a society to say, “Look, we're all at this table together. We all have a share in the outcome. And let's bring all of that energy together to work on behalf of good because we can do that.”

It's just, when people are complacent, when they are not in imminent fear of losing their livelihood, then boy, are they reckless. Now you don't have that buffer. You don't have the luxury of turning a blind eye. There is no blind eye now.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And do you feel--I mean, it sounds like you already felt like your work as a teacher of poetry and a teacher of poets was changing--not necessarily that you hadn't been an activist before, but you've always been writing to disturb, you've always been teaching out of the classroom in lots of different ways--but it sounds like this semester, it was really important for you to really be physically outside of the classroom?

D. A. POWELL: Well, because, you know, we teach so much about form and craft, and it's not like those things aren't important, but they're not what makes poetry poetry. It's sort of like, you know, putting the icing on the cake. If the cake isn't a good cake, then no amount of decorating is going to help. So, all of that internal stuff--the real work of poetry--is the veil of soul-making, the evolution of one's own humanity. That I feel has always been the real work for me as a teacher--to get people comfortable with digging inside and working through the emotional energy that's driving the poem.

So while I was on sabbatical, I thought, “I just really want to teach a course that's about where poetry comes from, not how you fix it once you got it on the page,” you kkno, somebody else, lots of people, can talk about that, and articulately. But I wanted to get students to get in touch with their most hot-button issues.

We started this semester by everyone writing on the board what outrages them--the course is called “Outrage” by the way. So people wrote a word or two on the board, and then they talked about why they were so passionate about it, and that passion, that's what I want to feed, not the “What magazine do you think I should send this poem to?” which is also crucial for many people, in many different ways. But it's not what I'm best at. I'm best at being somebody's first teacher, not being their editor.

[35:15]

RACHEL ZUCKER: I have also been really pushing back against the traditional workshop model and not doing that at all this semester. Although my class is sort of backwards from yours in an in a strange way--

D. A. POWELL: --but, different coasts.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, true [laughs]. But I think--I've been thinking a lot about how temperamentally, I'm not the best person to teach a poet or person how to fix something but also I’m really resisting that idea that that's what my job really ever could be or should be, you know. I’m thinking a lot about people saying now, “Let's not normalize this,” but let's not normalize anything really. And more and more, it's clear to me that the ways in which we want to fix a poem are really problematic. Like, I want my students to write poems that require a new critical language to really be involved in, and that confuse me as much as they delight me and provoke me and enrage me and that would be out of my league, in a certain way, to condescend to say, “Oh, take out this and do this, and then it will be quote, unquote, better.”

I love that you're asking them to start with outrage, and I love that you're asking them to go deep and I love that you're saying, “Okay, don't just think about writing this for yourself, but what are you going to do with the poem and what can poetry do? And poetry is not supposed to be this thing that's deep in the notebook.” But what do you say to the poets who may be asking you, “Yeah, but how do I write the poem like *Howl*? Like how do I write *Citizen*? How do I not necessarily fix my poem? But how do I get there?”

D. A. POWELL: Yeah, well, I mean, the answer is easier than we want to admit. Which is: you just keep writing. You have to write past all of the blunders and errors and almost--but I don't feel like treating every poem as if it's a patient in the poetry hospital is necessarily helpful. Because then what we do is we keep sending this message to students that you can fix this, you can transform this poem into something better. And maybe, really, what we should be doing is saying, “I like what you did here. Here's what I see the poem doing. And I'd like for you to try that 10 more times.” Not to go back and fix the poem, but to write a new version of it, based on what you already have figured out from the previous one. I'm more of a copyist monk kind of guy, like, “All right, let's go at that again.”

Early on in my poetry class taking--I think the first poetry class that I took that would that would qualify as a workshop, because I really didn't have workshop as an undergraduate--but there was a poetry class where my teacher would come in, and he would put lamps around the room and we would relax on couches and would read poems from dittos and um, I wrote a poem that I was very proud of, and of course, in those days, if I liked something, I would type it on a typewriter, otherwise it was mostly handwritten. And you can take a look around my office and see that there's this battle between organization and chaos that's always going on in my life. So, naturally, I lost that poem that I thought was so good. So I tried to write it again from memory. And I did get parts of it, but it also just went in a completely different direction.

[39:57]

And then at some point, a couple years later, I actually found the earlier version. And I remember sitting and looking at one and the other and it's like, “Well, I like things that both are doing. And yeah, I don't really like either poem in and of itself,” and I didn't then want to hybridize them or fix one to reflect the learning that went on and the other one.

I just decided: I learned something about myself, which is that if something's really important, you'll remember it. And if you don't remember it, it might come back to you. It might not. But the way to go is always forward, not to go back. I know a lot of people like to go digging through their old notebooks and like, “Oh, here's something that I could recycle.” And recycling is great, but for me, I like just stepping into a new place.

Every year on New Year's Day, I start a new notebook, and I retire the old one. Whatever's in there is in there. I don't need to go trying to retrieve it.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Does what's in the notebook become poems in the moment, or is that separate?

D. A. POWELL: Maybe, maybe not. It's a lot of--there are a lot of false starts, a lot of ideas that just don't become anything. Sometimes it's just a reaction to what's going on around me at the moment.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Do you always use green pen?

D. A. POWELL: Do I always use green pen?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah.

D. A. POWELL: No, not always.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oh, there's black.

D. A. POWELL: Sometimes I use black. Sometimes I use red. It depends on the mood I'm in, but generally speaking, I mostly use green pen these days because Pliny the Elder tells us that when Nero was at the Coliseum to watch the fights between gladiators, the sun was so harsh on his eyes that he used emeralds to, to cut the glare. And this is supposedly the first mention of anything that might be considered spectacles. Although the more research I've done on it, it seems that they were in fact actual gemstones that he would look through, not gemstones that had been made into glasses as some scholars think. So, green is a particularly comforting color. I like the color. It's easy on the eyes, and so it makes it easier to--it's also an easy color to ignore. It has this dual purpose, which is: it makes things visible and also sort of muted and soft at the same time.

So if I write something in black, it leaps out at me. But if I write it in green, it actually makes it difficult to read, and my own handwriting makes it difficult to read as well. So then, I'm constantly being put into the role of translator having to decipher my own cryptic scratches in green.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And what's the process like? So you write something in green, somewhat indecipherable in the notebook--and I see, so you've got this black notebook in front of you, but then you have another notebook in your pocket--

D. A. POWELL: Oh, yes. Well, that's for different--

RACHEL ZUCKER: Now little pieces of paper are falling out of your pocket--

D. A. POWELL: Those are receipts.

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Laughs] What goes in one notebook and what goes in the other?

D. A. POWELL: Hard to say. You know, I used to think that I had a method, but I don't know that I have a method, except that the little notebook that's falling apart, tends to me be more just "Pied Piper, poverty line, ladybugs," you know, it's just like words or phrases. And occasionally, I think the reason why I've been hanging on to this notebook in particular, is because I went to Oscar Wilde's grave and I took some notes. So, this has all of that which I am at some point going to turn into a little essay about Oscar Wilde's grave.

[45:07]

RACHEL ZUCKER: So do the notebooks tend to lead more towards essays or prose rather than poems? Or, like, when you say you're translating it, or part of your relationships to the notebooks is through this translation, what are you--they don't get translated into poems?

D. A. POWELL: Some of the things that I write in the notebooks become poems, but I mean, it's like, it's a very drafty draft--what is it Melville says about Moby Dick? "This is not a novel. It is a draft. Nay, a draft of a draft." I think I've always been drawn to the idea of the draft. Not Selective Service draft, but you know, the draft in the sense of keeping it quick, keeping it unfinished. I love Marianne Moore because she goes back and radically changes a poem into a different shape, a different form, a different idea, and I think that we fetishize doneness. We fetishize the printed word to the point where we have confused ourselves with the difference between paper and stone. We think that if something is in print, it is done. It's in its final version.

I don't believe that's true. I think that poetry is a living organic thing and that we can change it whenever we want. The fact that most people don't is, I think, a sad reality, but I still like to go back and change things. When I was reading at the University of Iowa last week, I read one of the poems from *Useless Landscape*--the final line of the poem is "Triumph over death with me, and we'll divide the air." And I just felt like I wanted to make a change. I changed "death" to "hate." Triumph over hate with me. It seemed more applicable to the moment. And, you

know, we do these kinds of substitutions all the time. You're singing a song, and you're like, “No, the lyric really needs to go this way right now to reflect my mood.” So I kind of like shuffling the cards and taking things out of order, making something new out of something old.

RACHEL ZUCKER: It's so interesting. And I think part of why I'm asking you this question is--or trying to kind of pin you down in a way that, in certain ways, is totally antithetical to who you are and also to our relationship--[laughs]

D. A. POWELL: [Laughs]. It’s so hard to pin me down.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I mean, I think one of the things I love so much about poetry is the way in which it makes a space for unknowingness and draft and unfinishedness--

D. A. POWELL: --and dream and intuition and spell casting and magic--

RACHEL ZUCKER: --contradiction--

D. A. POWELL: --all of these things that we tend to normalize out of life. We want everything to be efficient; we want it to be finished. We want it to be concrete; we want it to be knowable. And that's all fine and good for maybe 60% of life. But there has to be a huge chunk of your life which is improvisation, is, you know, thinking on your feet.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I feel like one of the things I'm experiencing at this particular moment, though, is being caught between that deep love of indeterminacy, the way in which poetry is a space of doubt and impossibility--

D. A. POWELL: --and multiple conflicting meanings which are pulling each other in different directions--

RACHEL ZUCKER: --multiple conflicting meanings, right. And this other desire that I have very strongly as a citizen, as a poet, as a human being, to want to resist any kind of moral relativism or kind of world where people say, “Well, that's just my opinion.” No, that's not okay. And to really feel decisive, to feel a sense of action--I feel like I don't want to give into “I don't know what to do. There's nothing to do.” Many people, I think, are all asking, “But what should I do?” They want directions. They want to know what to do, what to do first.

[50:56]

And I think that's a good thing. Very much so. It's odd because I feel like--the two seem to be in conflict. Those two loves. I do feel that poetry can be part of action and can have clarity that's useful to us right now. And yet, I think at its core or in its soul, it is this kind of space of never finished, not monolithic, certainly not fundamental in the sense of fundamentalism, and so it's a little bit odd to want to go to poetry for action, in a way.

D. A. POWELL: Yeah, but I think poetry gives us a lot of good examples of action, in the situation where action most matters, I think in a well-ordered society in a world where everything's working correctly, if your neighbor's house catches on fire, you can call the fire department, and they will arrive and they will take care of everything.

I think now, we are at a moment where we realize it's up to us to run in the burning building ourselves and save whoever's there. And I think that when that moment becomes clear to you, then you don't need to stand around asking people, “What should I do? How should I get involved?” You just do it. And I think that for a lot of people, right at this moment, they're getting involved in ways that make them even weird and uncomfortable--I'm not usually the sort of person who's out in the street demonstrating but I just feel like I can't not do it.

Poetry is the same. Poetry is one of those things that--oh, it's such a frivolous thing. But sometimes it really matters what we write in a poem. We actually need the

poem in certain times in our lives. And I think knowing the difference between the poems we write to waste time and the poems we write to redeem time. They have very different purposes, even though they might come from the same beginning impulse. And sometimes you don't know that you're writing the poem that matters until you've done it.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I mean, it's very clear to me that what I want poetry to do and what I want to do with poetry– it was already changing for me. In a way, I'm going back to my adolescent feeling.

D. A. POWELL: Me too! Me too. I love being an adolescent. [Laughs]. Especially now that I'm old enough to know better.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right! Part of it is throwing off the stuff that I--or rethinking, whatever--the stuff that we both were exposed to in graduate school. And then coming back to the reason I wanted to go--

D. A. POWELL: --even though, you know, you look back at what you were exposed to in graduate school, and it's like, there was actually no pressure. It's just, we created that. We were all there at a time where it felt like, "We've got these two years. Let's make the most of it." And we were each other's driving force. We were the ones who kept each other working and and interested. Teachers sometimes did but often, you know, they were often their own worlds with their own goals and problems.

[55:15]

But the best outcome of any writing program, really, is to have a community that makes you want to write. That's what I tried to give to my students as well. I say, "Check in with each other, keep each other supported, moving, active. Don't worry about whether you're going to write the book of poetry that everyone wants to read or the book of poetry that nobody wants to read because forty years after it happens, this situation could be completely reversed. Suddenly, it's your book that

everybody wants to read, and the other ones are considered cliche or irrelevant. It's a moving target. It's a living, vital thing."

And so, you know, when we talk about this ongoing materialist argument that we have in society and culture about what is the value of art, how does poetry matter? Those are really sort of indulgent, middle class discussions, because when it does matter, you don't you don't ask that question. And the ways in which it matters are so specific to the human being who's reading the poem or writing the poem. We can't expect that we're going to--poetry doesn't work that way. It's not a populist medium, for a very good reason. It's because it is the antithesis of mechanical reproduction, of one size fits all, of uniformity, of capitalism. Poetry is like, "I'm going to do whatever the fuck I want." Can I say fuck on a podcast?

RACHEL ZUCKER: You definitely can.

D. A. POWELL: I can't believe I went this long without!

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, you're the first person I've talked to, for the podcast, who was at Iowa at the same time as me.

D. A. POWELL: Yeah, but we didn't have classes together, which is really kind of weird.

RACHEL ZUCKER: It's kind of weird. I've always thought that maybe that was unintentionally good. We weren't in the same workshop. I think we were in some of the same seminars, we must have been.

D. A. POWELL: No.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Never?

D. A. POWELL: Never.

RACHEL ZUCKER: We were never in class together.

D. A. POWELL: Isn't that weird? But you and I both taught Interpretation of Literature, and we had that fifteen-minute slot between the time that your students exited and my students entered, and we talked pedagogy. “How do you teach people to do interpretive work?” “How do you teach them how to write essays?” Our conversations with one another were really more pragmatic. We were never in a room talking about how do you make poetry, what does it mean, those kinds of things.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right. How do you make it better? Yeah, we weren't talking about that with each other. And we still don't talk about that with each other. One of the best things that happened to me, from my two years there, was that for twenty years, you've been reading my poems and just saying “Keep going,” which is the greatest gift of all.

D. A. POWELL: And that’s mutual. You know how much you've mattered to me as a friend and a reader and a supporter. And as a writer. I feel like when I read your work, I get to experience poetry all over again. Nobody is writing the Rachel Zucker poem except Rachel Zucker. You can cut that part out if you're feeling modest, but you shouldn’t.

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Laughs]. Well what's interesting, I think, is that I want poetry to be this place--and it is on some level--for me where I can do whatever the fuck I want, and where, as you well know, from having read my poems for twenty years, I'm somewhat overly obsessed with pissing people off in the poems and then freaking out about having done that. But I think, although maybe I talk a big game about “Oh, poetry, has to be disruptive,” and I'm certainly disrupting, in my own way, or using the poem--that feels very much to be what I care most about--I'm also chicken shit on some level, for good reasons and bad reasons. For good reasons in the sense that I don't want to hurt people. I don't want to be part of the problem. I don't want to make certain kinds of offensive mistakes.

[1:00:46]

I think, over the years, people sometimes say, “Oh, do you think about your audience when you write?” No, not really, but I do think that I rely deep, deep, deep, deep, in the most important ways, on knowing that I'm going to be able to send you something and ask you, “Am I making the right kinds of mistakes? Am I saying fuck you in the right way to the right people, or the wrong way?”

D. A. POWELL: I'm such a horrible enabler--

RACHEL ZUCKER: --you are--

D. A. POWELL: I’m like, “Yes, you are going to piss people off, and I feel like you should do that.”

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Laughs]. Well, one time you said to me, “Are you gonna publish that?” One time you said that to me, and I thought, “Oh, hmm. My greatest enabler is voicing some doubt. I better take that seriously.”

D. A. POWELL: What was it?

RACHEL ZUCKER: It was the poem that you suggested I possibly read tonight. Yeah.

D. A. POWELL: Well, but I wasn't asking in a cautionary way. But like, “Can I watch to see what happens?”

RACHEL ZUCKER: Really? I didn't understand that. I thought--and even now--I first thought you meant “Can I bear to watch you go down in flames?” But you don't mean that?

D. A. POWELL: No, I mean, I feel like there's sometimes this sense of mock surprise among the readership, like the moment when Louie comes into Rick's

Café American and blows the whistle and says,"I am shocked, shocked! to find there is gambling going on in here." Like when people get outraged about poetry it's like, "What did you expect?" It's poetry. Of course it's going to piss people off.

RACHEL ZUCKER: In fact your whole class is called "Outrage" and you want them to start with their own outrage.

D. A. POWELL: Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I feel like I started off by saying this, but let me say one more time. I'm so discombobulated and seeing you and being with you is helping me to calm down and center myself. Often you're the person that I call, especially when I'm away from home and very late at night.

D. A. POWELL: Yeah, when you're in Sweden and you've got--

RACHEL ZUCKER: Norway. I've never been to Sweden.

D. A. POWELL: A distinction without a difference--

RACHEL ZUCKER: --or the other--Tucson, I've called you from Tucson, Pittsburgh, often--

D.A. POWELL: Canada.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Canada late at night. It's usually when I have given a poetry reading or done something and said something that I thought was really stupid. And then I call you and I say, "Oh my god, can I ever live this down? Was it really stupid?" And then you almost always say "Wait, why was that stupid?" [laughs]

D.A. POWELL: Yeah. I'd be surprised if you didn't do that.

RACHEL ZUCKER: So I have this Pavlovian response to you of just sort of settling down. Maybe it's gonna be okay.

D.A. POWELL: Well, thank you. I feel the same way. I mean, it was so hard--we talked about those two years when we were in graduate school together with no classes together--but the hardest moment for me in Iowa City was when you and Josh were leaving your apartment over there on Evans Street, and I was helping you pack up and then you drove off. I was like, "What the fuck? If I had known I was helping them leave, I would have resisted!"

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Laughs]. Oh my god, I am just having this memory of--not only did you help us, you helped us wrap all those breakables.

D.A. POWELL: And I labeled them!

RACHEL ZUCKER: You labeled them the craziest things! So a lot of them were photographs that I'd made of people in the program, portraits. And--

D.A. POWELL: Uh-oh, uh-oh. Maybe we should cut this part out.

[1:05:21]

RACHEL ZUCKER: No. I can't remember the exact thing you wrote. But we wrapped them in newspaper, and I asked you to write what it was so I wouldn't have to unwrap all of them if I was looking for something. They were framed photograph portraits. And you had the craziest--one of them said something like "Squirrel on a Log" or something, and it was a person! I was like "How am I supposed to know who this is, Doug?!" It wasn't a comment on their personality, it was just, visually, like, "I don't even know what this is!" They were the funniest. For so long, I didn't even want to unwrap them because I just loved that they had these crazy Doug descriptions.

D. A. POWELL: Be careful if you give me a Sharpie.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. [Laughs]. How did we become such good friends, though, that you were even sad to see us go?

D. A. POWELL: I think it was because you and I were teaching and we spent a long time talking about how do we teach? We would start having coffee and--

RACHEL ZUCKER: We also both worked at University Relations.

D. A. POWELL: That's it! We would also run into each other late at night In the old library building because I was writing press releases for the newspaper. And I would come and ask you how to undo something horrible that I had done on the computer because I didn't know how to use a computer. I'd be like, "I think I just cut this entire paragraph," and you'd be like, "Well, you just hit this button and this button." You were miraculous.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yes. I did know how to use Microsoft Word.

D. A. POWELL: I didn't! Remember, I was using a typewriter.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. It's really funny to think that my technology skills were part of what brought us together, not poetry.

D. A. POWELL: Well, almost everyone there had better technology skills than I did. I remember somebody in class--I think it was Michael McClure--said "I really liked this font that you're using." I'm like, "Font? It's a different wheel that I dropped into my typewriter to make the letters look different!"

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Laughs] I still don't really know--and I guess this is maybe not that interesting to anyone other than us--how we stayed friends, too. It just seems like a wonderful, magical thing. I mean, my memory or my perspective was that you were sort of friends with everyone and stayed friends with everyone because you're a very friendly person, but I'm not.

D. A. POWELL: Yeah, I don't know that. Because I didn't stay in touch with everybody. There was a huge contingent of folks that moved to San Francisco all around the same time. That was sort of my workshop community. We were at AWP together, but even before that, I don't know how we stayed in touch because we didn't even really have email in those days.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, we wrote letters--

D. A. POWELL: --and phone calls.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. You're good at talking on the phone. Not everybody is!

D. A. POWELL I still remember your number.

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Laughs] I mean, the other thing I think--

D. A. POWELL: --yours is one that's easily dialed.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I do think it's interesting that I've said to you, jokingly, "I'm a terrible reader for you." Because I never have any suggestions. I never have any ideas. I love every single thing you've ever sent me. And so it's a very sincere and genuine response. But we just don't have that relationship.

D. A. POWELL: Usually, if I'm sending you work, I'm not saying, "How do I fix this?" I'm saying, "Tell me I'm not crazy," which is a very different conversation.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right, and I've never thought you were crazy. And you know I would tell you if I did think so, because I can't, I don't know how to, lie.

D. A. POWELL: I would hope so. [Laughs] You can't hold those things back.

RACHEL ZUCKER: No, but it's interesting because other friends of mine who I love very dearly, I have been in that situation with them, where I've said "Yeah, I don't think you should. This is maybe not okay." Not, "You're crazy," but "Wow, I don't know if you-- I'm not sure about this one." Or I feel very helpful to certain people. I don't feel helpful to you at all. I just feel loving.

[1:10:21]

D. A. POWELL: Well, that's the most helpful thing in the world, having that sense of shared purpose. You and I are very different writers, and I love that we can each be our own selves and still connect in so many ways. I feel like that's really one of the amazing things about poetry--it doesn't have to be any one thing. It can be so many different things. A lot of times when you send me work, I'm like, "Oh, this is a twenty-six page poem about a squirrel on a palm tree. I don't know what I'm going to do." And then I sit down and I start reading it and it's like, "How did that go so quickly?" It's because there's some magic spell that you cast over language that makes it do things that I didn't think poetry did. But it always feels like "Well, of course. Rachel Zucker did it. It must be right."

RACHEL ZUCKER: And I have that feeling, often, when you send me poems. I mean, lately, it's interesting because we've been reading each other poems a lot over the phone.

D. A. POWELL: Yeah, because we're afraid of letting it out.

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Laughs] But before, when you would send me something, my fear was not about twenty-six pages--because you don't write twenty-six page poems--but was--

D. A. POWELL: --when I do, they'll be--

RACHEL ZUCKER: --but it was more, "I'm not sure--I don't know these references. I don't feel, necessarily, this this poem was written for me," or "What if

I don't understand it?" And then there's that little moment of trepidation, and then I'm in it and I'm just completely immersed. And I don't care if you didn't write it for me. It is mine, at that moment. I feel--

D. A. Powell: Well, and there are actually some that I wrote for you. I don't know if you've seen them in various books.

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Laughs]. No, I think I meant more like, "Is this poem--" I know that and I feel very loved by that, but more like--"I don't know if I can read this poem if I haven't seen these movies and listened to this music." And sometimes our conversation will go like that, like you'll say, "Oh, well, you know," and then you'll say something and I'm like, "I have no idea. I have no idea what you're talking about."

D. A. POWELL: Like why you haven't seen all the Jane Wyman movies?

RACHEL ZUCKER: I don't even know that is. Right now, there we go.

D. A. POWELL: Yeah. Well, nobody knows who she was, except that she was Ronald Reagan's first wife.

RACHEL ZUCKER: All right, let's be so serious. So, what's what's going on? Am I allowed to ask you about your poems that I've heard? Are those secret? I can cut it out, whatever. You tell me.

D. A. POWELL: I don't know what's going on. I've been writing poems and I'm not interested in putting them into a book. The whole way in which the emphasis in poetry programs has shifted from individual poems to books just makes me a little sad because one of the things that I always loved about poetry--and of course, the first poetry books that I read were anthologies. Every poem is different. It's an absolutely new experience. And I like sequences, but I feel like not everything belongs in a sequence. Not everything needs to. Not everything needs to have a right place.

I love--if you reach behind you there on the shelf, see that black box that’s sticking out. When I was an undergraduate, this guy came and taught at Sonoma State. I did not take a class with him, but I would stand outside of his office and read all of the stuff on the things that he would post outside of his office. What I love about this book is that it's not actually a book. It's loose pages that can be put into any order. Some of it is typed. Some of it is handwritten. Sometimes he palimpsests over his own handwriting. He might make numerous attempts at the same thing.

[1:15:45]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Wow.

D. A. POWELL: “My heart is beating,” it says, but it also says, “I am a beast.” And the way that those two ideas lay over top of each other and sort of grow into an organism inside the word “heart,” and the way in which beast and beating rhyme with each other over the page, I thought, “Poetry can do so much more than we allow it to do.” So I'm always--I'm more interested in the individual page than in a set order that it should go in. Even when I've put my own books in order, like when I was working on *Useless Landscape*, I diligently put everything in this very precise order. And then I threw all the pages on the floor and picked them up one at a time. So in some cases, the order stayed the same, but I was like, “This poem does follow that one; it makes sense that they're after each other.” But in some cases, it was just like, “I think this poem next because it's different than the one before.”

RACHEL ZUCKER: Did you use the order of it falling on the floor in the end?

D. A. POWELL: Yeah, not falling on the floor. It was pushed.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Pushed, sorry. Intentional.

D. A. POWELL: Yeah. That was the order that it ended up being.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Wow. Okay, but how?

D. A. POWELL: Because I feel like we need order, we need chaos. We can't privilege one or the other. It has to be a little bit of both.

RACHEL ZUCKER: So I'm really interested in and love and, of course, support your resistance to making a book, but how are all of your beloved fans and readers going to read your work if you don't put it in a book that they can get?

D.A. POWELL: Well, I mean, you know, I'm not anti-book. At some point, there will be a book. But I'm not in any hurry. I feel like this artificial deadline that we make for ourselves as writers, "I've got to get this done, so I can send it out to--" to what? Oblivion?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, you're not writing to oblivion! You're writing to--and this is an interesting thing that's happened, I think, for you--you really, really have an audience, and an audience that really cares extremely deeply about you and your work. Is that a good feeling for you at this point?

D. A. POWELL: It's kind of a weird thing. Because, when I started writing poetry, I was really just writing for my own amusement. And in some ways, that's what I've come back to, which means, while I love and respect the idea of an audience, I don't feel like we need to hurry to play to them or to pander to them, or if they really are interested in the next book, they'll be interested whenever it comes out. And if they're not, that's okay, too.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Do you feel like knowing that you have that readership makes you more patient and less--I mean, did you feel--you were, I think, the first person in our class to really publish a book. I think. I think you were. And certainly even if it wasn't the first, it really was widely read. So did you did you feel a pressure at that point to get your book out, and now, many books later--

[1:20:15]

D. A. POWELL: Well, I might have felt a pressure, but the pressure was not having to do with readership. It was my own internal desire to fix a moment in time, to inscribe it in a way that mattered deeply to me. There were all sorts of conversations around that book, like, “Should it be bound in this way? Should the poems be printed sideways?” All this stuff. I was like, “Well, those are editorial choices.” For me, I liked having the book exist in the way that I wrote it, but I knew that it would become something else once it left my hands. And for a while I was really invested in that sense of “I have to get this finished by a certain time.” I feel less of that, particularly because I think *Useless Landscape* was a book that I wrote very quickly. That book took maybe a little bit longer to write than *Tea*, but it's twice as long.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And the poems inside are longer.

D. A. POWELL: The poems are long. Everything about that book is bigger than anything I've done before. And I felt very satisfied with it. Not like I felt it's all good or it's all bad, or anything, just that I needed to pick a start and end date to that furious writing that I was doing, which mainly was a way of distancing myself from the previous book because *Chronic* I felt was so, so stained by the human emotions that went into it, it just wasn't something that I wanted to continue reading from or to look back at. So I needed to make another book in the world, for myself, not for anyone else. A way of sort of erasing one thing by substituting another. Now I don't feel that kind of urgency. I have urgency around particular poems sometimes. But I also feel like it's good to just have fun because that's what I started doing with poetry. My first poems were not in any way a serious attempt at poetry. In fact, it was quite the opposite. Like, “Poetry, anyone can do it. Look at this!”

So now I'm kind of back in that zone. Which means sometimes I write poems that people really do look at us asconce and say, “Why are you writing this?” But I don't care. I'm just indulging myself. And I do also write about complex human

and moral and philosophical and religious issues as well. But I don't want to be stuck in any one place as a poet. I feel like too often poets make a place for themselves in the world as this kind of--it's like a branding thing. I don't want to be branded in any one way. So, very often, people will read a new poem by me and say, "Well, this doesn't sound like any of your old work." And I'm like "That's good. That's okay." To always be trying new things--I wrote a poem that consists of only three letters.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Really?

D. A. POWELL: Yeah, because I was reading a lot of minimalist poets, and I thought, "What's the what's the least number of sounds I can get away with? What's the least number?"

RACHEL ZUCKER: Do you have that one? Do you want to read it?

D. A. POWELL: So, this poem, I'll show you. It's got three letters of the alphabet that I use. Those three letters all together have only nine sounds to them. I was reading Ronald Johnson, you know Ronald Johnson?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Didn't he write *Radi Os*?

[1:25:29]

D. A. POWELL: Right, *Radi Os*--

RACHEL ZUCKER: --which is the erasure of *Paradise Lost*?

D. A. POWELL: Yes, yes--

RACHEL ZUCKER: --an erasure of *Paradise Lost*--

D. A. POWELL: --and he did a series of poems that he called “Earth Songs” that were very spare, very minimal. One of the poems, for example, consists of the word heart, printed in small caps, three times, next to itself to create a line. “Heart, heart, heart,” and then six lines deep. So three times six--there's eighteen “hearts” on the page. But because the word is pressed against itself on both sides and top and bottom, you get this density of “heart,” that also, as you peer into it, gives you “hearth” and “earth”, and “here,” and “the,” and “art,” all these other words that you see inside. You can, in fact, read a single line not just as “heart, heart heart,” but you can also read it as “hear the art,” or I'm sure there are other ways to hear it.

But, in any case, that restriction of utilizing just one word or one sound or a very spare palette was intriguing to me. I had just been to DeYoung to see the watercolor exhibit by that guy, that English guy who did watercolors.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay…

D. A. POWELL: I don't know anything about art, but anyway.

RACHEL ZUCKER: That’s not true, but okay.

D. A. POWELL: That guy!

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay.

D. A. POWELL: And I was like, “Oh, you can do a lot with just two colors!” So, reading Ronald Johnson again, I came across a little note in the selected poems of Ronald Johnson that the “Earth Songs” which I had so admired--his own word that he used to refer to them when talking to himself about his poetry, which is what we often do--he called them strains, strains in the sense of strains of music, strains of a biological thing, but also strains in the sense of--you’re almost straining to get the meaning; you're almost straining to hear the smallness of the sounds. So this poem is called “First Strains,” because it was my first attempt at a kind of strain.

[Reads “First Strains”]

D. A. POWELL: That’s the least I could do! [Laughs].

RACHEL ZUCKER: I just love that you work in this mode, that you love poems like this, minimalist poems, and then you love Ginsberg and Whitman, and you're not looking for some kind of compatibility of those voices and forms--not in the outside world and not in the inside world in yourself.

Do you think--this was a question that was asked to me and I didn't do a good job answering it, so I'm just going to dump it on you--do you think all poems are political?

[1:30:00]

D. A. POWELL: I think to write poetry is political because you're making a choice, which is to step outside of the conventions and the heterodoxies of purpose and use and all of the ways in which we think about the world in terms of “How is it helpful? How does it help us?” Poetry is a decidedly unhelpful thing in that regard. I mean, it’s both helpful and not helpful, but it's helpful in ways which are irreducible to a dollar sign. Nobody makes money off their poetry. And if they do, they're very surprised and sort of baffled by it. Because it's not what you're really going after.

RACHEL ZUCKER: If there were to be, which there never will be, a real sea change, and suddenly poets made money and everyone thought poetry was the most useful and important thing, would you then leave poetry for something else?

D. A. POWELL No, because if poetry becomes a populist thing, I would be, one, very surprised, and number two, sort of excited and glad, but I don't know that it would change my relationship to it because we do experience these moments where poetry really is important to our culture. It happened just a couple of days ago that the number of poems that got shared on the internet went through the roof.

People need poetry in ways that really are important. But I don't want to be the guy who has to think about that--of what use is this poem. All right, I'm going to read you--

RACHEL ZUCKER: I thought that was the title.

D. A. POWELL: What?

RACHEL ZUCKER: “Of What Use is This Poem?”

D. A. POWELL: That is a good title! I'm going to read you something that I wrote when I was in Italy because while I was there, I did almost nothing useful, except I just relaxed, which I almost never really do. And then I began to feel guilty, because I had squandered six weeks in this magic cool place. And all I did was listen to birds and take pictures of flowers and eat lots of really good food. And I would meet up with Matthew Dickman in the afternoon, and we would sit in the garden and smoke a joint or something. And we would read poems to each other. He and I come from very different aesthetic worlds. And even our genealogies are different. So we began to realize that it was actually very helpful, very useful, for us to just read poems to each other that mattered to us somewhere along the way. Because we had such different development as writers, even though probably were more alike than different, certain--if you take a picture of us from behind, we look very similar.

RACHEL ZUCKER: This, our whole country, should go to Italy, have good food, do nothing, smoke a joint, read each other's poems, and talk about different genealogy.

D. A. POWELL: Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Wouldn't that be great?

D. A. POWELL: It would be so helpful.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. Okay, sorry. That was a brief utopian fantasy.

D. A. POWELL: Yeah. So toward the end of my stay there--and there was a final dinner where everyone was supposed to do or say something, and I had been--I had a studio, which I never have in real life, for six weeks. I had this studio with cork board on the walls, and so I hung all of these blank pages of paper with those little push pins. And as I would be walking through the castle, with my headphones on, listening to Barry White--because, you know, I was in Italy when Barry White died, and every time I go there, I feel sad on behalf of Barry White--things would occur to me and I would just write them on these pages, but in no order. There was no hierarchy or orthodoxy to it of any kind; I just wanted to get thoughts down. Kind of like this little notebook here. This is the chaos notebook. This is the notebook which, by its very design, imposes a kind of order. You have to flip--oh, here's a poem that I wrote in Portland. Sorry for a huge aside, but it's a found poem. It's called "Port Land."

[1:35:47]

[D. A. Powell reads "Port Land"]

D.A. POWELL: This just was a sign that I saw hanging outside of a restaurant. On one side, it said "Yes, we are open." And on the other side it said, "Sorry, we are closed." And I thought, "So strange in a city that names itself after an opening, that it has this--open and close--that was just twisting in the wind." So sometimes it was one and sometimes the other. And I thought, "That really is America. We are a country of ports that are open and closed at the same time." But to get back to Italy--a country that should be building walls to keep people out--[laughs]--

RACHEL ZUCKER: We all want to go there!

D. A. POWELL: Right. We're all trying, we're all in the process of applying for immigration papers at this moment. I've always been interested in magic, and I had

been reading about Pythagorans and their mystical, mathematic cult. And I came across a very strange word, the word grimoire. It's like memoir, but it starts with "grim." And apparently grimoire was the word that the Catholic Church used when they passed an edict against books of spells and magic. Books of spells and magic were referred--by the Catholic Church--to as grimoires. So I began to envision this grimoire, a book of spells, and I thought it would be organized in this subject matter--spells for this, spells for that. But I didn't get so far as to making an entire grimoire; I only got as far as the chapter on visions. So this is from the grimoire, "Whence Visions Come," and it's essentially just a catalog of the things that might cause visions, when you're in Italy or anywhere.

[D. A. Powell reads "Whence Visions Come"]

[1:40:45]

RACHEL ZUCKER: When you read that, the prayer flags got all excited. I know it was the wind, but I choose to believe it was actually your poem inspiring--look at them! They're dancing and celebrating.

D. A. POWELL: Yeah. The prayer flags are doing their job. We gotta do ours.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah.

D. A. POWELL: One of the people that was living there in the castle, in the turret--there were a dozen of us in various parts of the castle--was this marvelous graphic novelist named Carol Tyler. She did a book called *Soldier's Heart* about her father's--his late development of post traumatic stress disorder because he had internalized so much killing during World War Two, that that generation never got to talk about. They had to just shut it in and man up or woman up. And so she did this graphic novel, and she was giving a gallery talk about how she made the inks and decided on which ink would go with the flashbacks and what color would be associated with this particular emotion. She says, "Here you can see where the ink sort of washes out and trails off, that's because I was crying." I was like, "Yes,

yeah, that's what we can't teach our students. That's what they have to experience for themselves--that sometimes the lines on the paper begin to blur because you're crying, because you're genuinely moved by what it is that you're doing as an artist." I worry over people that never have that experience.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Because they're not going deep enough or they're not letting themselves be open to that place?

D. A. POWELL: Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: It's very interesting to me, when I come across--

D. A. POWELL: If you're going to open the book of spells, you have to cast it.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right! I mean, when I do come across a poet who doesn't want to go to that place, I'm so interested, like, "What brought you to poetry, as a place that you thought was going to keep you away from your deepest darkest fears and loves and rages and--" like, "Oh, you thought poetry was a good place to go for that kind of safety!" That is not my relationship to poetry, but I think there are people who want to play with the language--and I have a lot of respect for that--or want to be in relationship to the world through a filter of language that is abstracting them or protecting them in some way--

D. A. POWELL: Well, I think those are just different sides of the same three or four sided coin. Poetry can be a place to do all of those things, and your temperament ultimately helps to decide in what direction you go. But I feel like whatever kind of poet you are, you're also all the others too. And you have to be open to that. I mean, really, what I was thinking when I wrote this poem was, "In what way does the world act upon us?" Some of them are obvious ways and some not so obvious. Where do visions come from? Practically everything.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And I love the idea, especially right this minute, of poems as spells--

D. A. POWELL: We're going to need to send some spells out in the world--

RACHEL ZUCKER: --and they are spells, to some extent. There's no way that we could have the response that we often have to a really amazing poem if it was just words. No. It's acting as a spell to make us feel something or see something or smell something that's not there.

[1:45:45]

D. A. POWELL: Yeah. Or to make us fall in love.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. Yeah.

D. A. POWELL: Poems really do create a reaction, which, you know, is the same as spell casting. People tend to disregard the power of magic, and yet, at the same time, those same people go out and practice magic everyday without thinking about it. They will dress up in an outfit with particular colors on it and go to a stadium and sit in a circle and chant things expecting to affect the outcome of what's happening down on the field below. Now, if that's not the definition of magic. I don't know what it is. And yet, you know, we live in a world of the rational and the scientifically provable. Well, science can only prove so much. Faith has to account for the rest. And what I try and remind my students of is that they have faith somewhere within them that they're afraid of or worried about, like, “I don't want to be an irrational person.” But that's part of being a person.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Let's make some spells and hexes!

D. A. POWELL: Should we go get some lunch?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Let’s go get some lunch!

RACHEL ZUCKER: : This has been episode thirteen of Commonplace: Conversations with Poets (and Other People). Music written and performed by Moses Zucker Goren, artwork by Eitan Darwish. Commonplace producers are the talented, hardworking and immensely kind Nicholas Fuenzalida, Christine Larusso, and Zach Tackett, Daniel Shiffman is the not-so-secret advisor on all things Commonplace. Thank you to D. A. Powell for donating copies of his book and to listeners for reaching out with their heartfelt encouragement. Until next time, be well, speak up, act out, and thank you for listening.

[Music]