

# SAL/on air: Maxine Kumin

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## SPEAKERS

Maxine Kumin, Margit Rankin, Rebecca Hoogs



Maxine Kumin 00:09

And in the rhythm of the swim I hummed a two-four-time slow hymn. I hummed abide with me. The beat rose in the fine thrash of my feet, rose in the bubbles I put out Slantwise, trailing through my mouth. My bones drank water; water fell through all my doors. I was the well. That fed the lake that met my sea In which I sang Abide with Me.



Rebecca Hoogs 00:37

Maxine Kumin, whom we lost in 2014, once said that, quote, "The garden has to be tended to every day, just as the horses have to be tended to, not just every day but morning, noon and night, writing I think, exerts the same kind of discipline. I think of myself as a Jewish Calvinist. You know, salvation through Grace, Grace through good works in working is good, just that simple." I'm Rebecca Hoogs, the Interim Executive Director of Seattle Arts & Lectures, you're listening to SAL/ On Air, a collection of talks and readings from the world's best writers from over 30 years of Seattle Arts & Lectures. In this episode, recorded in April of 2005, we hear poems from across Maxine Kumin's impressive body of work, including her collection Jack and other new poems, acclaimed for her meticulous observation and her mastery of traditional forms. Kumin's poetry draws comparisons to Robert Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, and Anne Sexton, who was her longtime friend, and collaborator, but her works defy easy comparisons, often reflecting the dailiness of life and death on her New Hampshire horse farm. Her powers lay in the unsentimental way, she translated personal experience into resonant verse, 'The paradoxical freedom of working in form, as she says

in this reading, is that a quote gives you permission to say the hard truth.' Let's listen to some of those hard truths now. And to Kumin's good works. This is SAL on air.

M

### Maxine Kumin 02:27

Thank you for that warm welcome. It's very nice to be here in the Pacific Northwest. And I didn't know whether to say because it's April poetry month, I thought I would start with a found poem, or should I say it's because I'm in the Pacific Northwest, and this poem comes from a pamphlet published by the Canadian minister, Ministry of the Environment, and it's handed out at Banff, Jasper and so on. And the poem is called You Are In Bear Country. I didn't do very much to the language in the pamphlet. But the poet does come in at the end, as you will hear. They've been here for thousands of years. You're the visitor: Avoid encounters. Think ahead. Keep clear of berry patches garbage dumps, carcasses. On woods walks bring noisemakers, bells. Clap hands along the trail or sing but in dense bush or by running water bear may not hear your clatter. Whatever else don't whistle. Whistling is thought by some to imitate the sounds bears make when they mate. You need to know there are two kinds: *ursus arctus horribilis* or grizzly and *ursus americanus* the smaller black said to be somewhat less likely to attack. Alas, a small *horribilis* is difficult to distinguish from a large *americanus*. Although there is no guaranteed life-saving way to deal with an aggressive bear some ploys have proved more successful than others. Running's a poor choice. Bear can outrun a racehorse. Once you're face to face speak softly. Take off your pack and set it down to distract the grizzly, Meanwhile back slowly toward a large sparsely branched tree but remember black bears are agile climbers in which case a tree may not offer escape. As a last resort you can play dead. Drop to the ground face down. In this case wearing your pack may shield your body from attack. Courage. Lie still. Sometimes you bear may veer away. If not bears have been known to inflict only minor injuries upon the prone. Is death by bear to be preferred to death by bomb? Under these extenuating circumstances your mind may make absurd leaps. The answer's yes. Come on in, Cherish your wilderness. Well, in this next poem, The man is on the ground. And this poem is called In The Park. I like to read it actually to academic audiences, because it discusses the difference between lie and lay, which I understand this administration is declaring obsolete. But now really, this is a serious poem, In The Park. You have forty-nine days between death and rebirth if you're a Buddhist. Even the smallest soul could swim the English Channel in that time or climb, like a ten-month-old child, every step of the Washington Monument to travel across, up, down, over or through --you won't know till you get there which to do. He laid on me for a few seconds said Roscoe Black, who lived to tell about his skirmish with a grizzly bear in Glacier Park. He laid on me not doing anything. I could feel his heart beating against my heart. Never mind lie and lay, the whole world confuses them. For Roscoe Black you might say all forty-nine days flew by. I was raised on the Old Testament. In it God talks to Moses, Noah, Samuel,

and they answer. People confer with angels. Certain animals converse with humans. It's a simple world, full of crossovers. Heaven's an airy Somewhere, and God has a nasty temper when provoked, but if there's a Hell, little is made of it. No longtailed Devil, no eternal fire, and no choosing what to come back as. When the grizzly bear appears, he lies/lays down on atheist and zealot. In the pitch-dark each of us waits for him in Glacier Park. Well, here's one more in this genre, and this is based on a Tlinkit Indian legend from the Admiralty islands. So it seems an appropriate poem to read tonight. It's called, The Rendezvous. How narrow the bear trail through the forest, one paw print following the other in the manner of good King Wenceslas tagged by his faithful serf. How, according to the legend, a bear is able to feel shame and if a woman meets a male bear she should take off all her clothes, thereby causing him to run away. How I meet a male bear. How I am careful not to insult him. I unbutton my blouse. He takes out his teeth. I slip off my skirt. He turns his back and works his way out of his pelt, which he casts to the ground for a rug. He smells of honey and garlic. I am wet with human fear. How can he run away, unfurred? How can I, without my clothes? How we prepare a new legend. This was a request so I'm going to read it it goes very far back in my ancient history to a time when I was a late adolescent and dreaming of making it to the Olympics. It's called Morning Swim. It's a you know it's a summer camp poem. I should say that about it. And it's written in rhyming couplets. That was the other thing I wanted to say. Into my empty head there come a cotton beach, a dock wherefrom I set out, oily and nude through mist, in chilly solitude. There was no line, no roof or floor to tell the water from the air. Night fog thick as terry cloth closed me in its fuzzy growth. I hung my bathrobe on two pegs. I took the lake between my legs. Invaded and invader, I went overhand on that flat sky. Fish twitched beneath me, quick and tame. In their green zone they sang my name and in the rhythm of the swim I hummed a two-four-time slow hymn. I hummed "Abide With Me." The beat rose in the fine thrash of my feet, rose in the bubbles I put out slantwise, trailing through my mouth. My bones drank water; water fell through all my doors. I was the well that fed the lake that met my sea in which I sang "Abide With Me." And just two other little poems before I read from Jack and other new poems. This poem is called Praise Be and it's about the birth of a foal. We aren't reading horses anymore, but in all the years that we did, it was my practice to move down to the barn and sleep on top of the sawdust pile that final week, because I couldn't trust the intercom. I kept hearing things and felt very insecure. Well, the gestation period for a mare is 11 months. And so you know, when it's 10 months, in three weeks, that's when I moved down. This mayor was two weeks late and gets a little old sleeping on the sawdust pile. And we named this f, Praise Be. Eleven months, two weeks in the womb and this one sticks a foreleg out frail as a dowel quivering in the unfamiliar air and then the other leg, cocked at the knee at first, then straightening and here's the head, a big blind fish thrashing inside its see-through sack and for a moment the panting mare desists, lies still as death. I tear the caul, look into eyes as innocent, as skittery as minnows. Three heaves, the shoulders pass. The hips emerge. Fluid as snakes

the hind legs trail out glistening. The whole astonished filly, still attached, draws breath and whinnies a treble tremolo that leaps in her mother who nickers a low-key response. Let them prosper, the dams and their sucklings. Let nothing inhibit their heedless growing. Let them raise up on sturdy pasterns and trot out in light summer rain onto the long lazy unfenced fields of heaven. And this is the title poem called Looking For Luck In Bangkok. This was true 20 years ago, just about on the outskirts of the city. Now I suspect you have to go farther out into the countryside to say it looking for luck in Bangkok. Often at markets I see people standing in line to walk under an elephant. They count out a few coins, then crouch to slip beneath the wrinkly umbrella that smells of dust and old age and a thousand miracles. They unfold on the other side blessed with long life, good luck, solace from grief, unruly children, and certain liver complaints. Conspicuous Caucasian, I stoop to take my turn. The feet of my elephant are stout as planted pines. His trunk completes this honest structure, this tractable, tusked, and deeply creased endangered shelter. I squat in his aromatic shade reminded of stale bedclothes, my mother's pantry shelves of cloves and vinegar, as if there were no world of drought, no parasites, no ivory poachers, My good luck running in as his runs out. Well, this is called New Hampshire February 7 2003. That was the day of the blizzard of 78. You don't get that kind of snow normally here but well, you'll see how this goes. New Hampshire February 7 2003. It's snowing again. All day reruns of the blizzard of 78. Newscasters vying for bragging rights how it was to go hungry. After they'd thumped the vending machines empty. The weatherman clumping for miles on snowshoes to get to his mic, so he could explain how three lows could collide to create a lineup of isobars. footage of state troopers peering into the caked windows of cars backed up for white miles on the interstate. No reruns today of the bombings in Vietnam. Two million civilians blown apart most of them children under 16. Children always the least able to dive for cover. When all that tonnage bursts from a blind sky, snow here is waiting the pine trees while we wait for the worst for war to begin. Schools closed how the children love a benign blizzard, a downhill scrimmage of tubes and sleds. But who remembers the blizzard that burst on those other children? Back then we called it collateral damage. And we'll again. Well, Theater Redkey is a name well known and much loved here. And so I'm gonna read this little poem, which is an homage to Theater Redkey. It's called Fox on his Back. It's kind of intricately rhymed, but you probably won't hear that on first read. On long nights shy of melt, implacable and clear wind drilling the last leaf. The poet to play it safe slept with a baby's quilt pulled over his bald head. Oh, watch the winter for to remember love. He said. Fox on his back in a hole. Snake Eyes in the wall asleep. grubs shellacked in their coils, Sap locked tight to the pith, roots sucking a hollow tooth. A brown and pregnant bear leaf wrapped like an old cigar. Or what's the winter for the quilted poet asked doors slam overhead as maple buffets ash to remember love, he said. I'm going to read a hard poem now and then then I'll be able to go back and read an easier one. As you probably know, the Patriot Act is coming up for renewal. I bet not many of you know what it stands for you're going to find out. This is

called *Appropriate Tools an Ellergy and Rant*. An elergy for the century I was born in and outlasted somewhat, to my surprise, an elergy for the two world wars between which I was born, an elegy for the sidewalk chalk marks I traced with my fingers only years later coming to understand that these mental hot drunk sandwiches, an apple at the back door, an elegy for my father's tears in 1939 over the final letters in his hand from the desperate Polish cousins. An elegy for my brothers who left me behind the lone survivor into the 21st century. An allergy for this century, born in blood and bombs and for the simple rights we once took for granted, the right to speak out, congregate, sit down, go limp, sometimes get beaten up or tear gassed. Wait in the holding cell like expectant puppies for the mother's milk of bail. Next day see ourselves on the local news, small heroes or villains of nonviolent resistance, fathered by Thoreau and Ghandi and furthered by Martin Luther King. An elegy today for any who overstay their visas, which is now a crime against the state thanks to the uniting and strengthening America by providing appropriate tools required to intercept and obstruct Terrorism Act for which the Patriot Act is acronym. And allergy for our ignorance for our indifference to the fateful evening that the NYPD. This is not a TV show, burst into an Indian restaurant where two members of doctors without borders on leave, were enjoying a fiery green curry. Cops guns cocked, screaming, kicking open doors to closets, to restrooms, the galley. At first, they appeared to be gangsters in uniform. But no, they were checking IDs seeking illegals. The kitchen help all Hispanics were made to crawl out on their hands and knees. How else to witness their humiliation except as malicious pleasure. No one was arrested here, but I thought I had died and this was hell said the Egyptian married to an American, father of a three year old, whose house was raided in the middle of the night, a favorite Gestapo tactic. Having overstayed his student visa, now a criminal act under the Patriot legislation. He was taken in for questioning and declared an enemy combatant, not entitled to a lawyer or to a phone call, but was disappeared into a maximum security prison in the Midwest, released three months later, he faces deportation. An elergy and rant for these and similar fetherings that will reach none but the dissident few who happen to read this page. Later, the words of this poem will be swept up and discarded. Our letters of protest will be shredded, our legal channels will be canceled. If not blatantly rigged, our elections will be mishandled. The man in the street will waive his allotted flag and you there without one your with your publicly negative emails and faxes, your weekly marches, which are still permitted, but are herded into cul-de-sacs where mace and pepper spray may be employed to curb the unruly. You are up against the wall now, up against the wall in the US of A. I'm going to read a little fantasy poem here called *Widow and Dog*. My husband did not come out here with me. But I assure you that he's he was not represented in this poem. After he died she started letting the dog sleep on his side of the bed they had shared for fifty-one years. A large discreet dog, he stayed on his side but the tags on his collar jingled as he sighed and especially when he scratched so she took his collar off and then his smooth tawny bulk close to her but not touching eased her through the next night and the

next. One morning, a chipmunk and his wife somehow slipped in through the screen door when neither of them was looking. She got up screaming from her coffee and whacked at them with a broom. Dog pounced and pounced but they were faster than he was and dove under the refrigerator. After a while he stopped crashing into chairs and skidding around corners in fruitless pursuit and then they came and went untroubled even drinking out of his water dish, their tails at right angles. That summer it just seemed simpler to leave the window by the bird feeder open for ease of refilling. Some creatures slipped casually out and in. The titmice were especially graceful. She loved to watch them elevate and retract their crests whenever they perched on the lips of the kitchen counters. The goldfinches chattered and sang like drunken canaries and once in a thunderstorm a barred owl blundered into that fake crystal chandelier she had always detested. Autumn fell on them in a joyous rush. The first needles of hard frost, the newly sharp wind, the final sweep and swirl of leaves, a swash of all-day rain were not unwelcome. Hickory nuts ricocheted off the barn's metal roof like a rain of beebie-gun pellets. They both took afternoon naps. They both grew portly. While Dog in his dumb allegiance dozed on the hearth, sometimes he ran so fiercely in his dreams that he bared his teeth. Reclusive comfortable Widow scribbled in her journal. It did not matter how much she woolgathered, how late into the night she read, it did not matter if she completed this poem, or another. There are a number of poems in this book that are persona poems, that is to say they're written in the voices of others. And this is one of them. It's called Magda of Hospice House. And it too is in couplets, but they're for the most part and unrhymed. They call me Maggie here. I love my work as specialist in easement. Now I am naturalized and marketable. Death is the thing I know it's catch and gurgle. I oversee the art of dying. Art is what we try to make of it with music and good wines, old fashioned beds as deepest cradles, down pillows, percale sheets, and isn't it odd, juicy fruit gum. I like to think our ministrations the bent slaw, striking. The bent straw slaking. morphine thirst can alter history a little. I am so sad I have come out on the other side the poet wrote before he died. But all of us one day we'll cross that boundary. I crossed the Danube first on an inner tube, the summer of 89. My name was Magda then. I was too full of empty deaths to stay too full of machine guns hangings, orphans unfed to the end blood baths in ancient Timisoara, and then the tyrants order to shoot into the swollen crowds in Bucharest. Nixon gave Ceausescu a Buick limousine. I crossed to take my chances in Yugoslavia. It was still Yugoslavia back then, and gladly served six weeks detention. When Nikolai and Elena hands bound went down before the firing squad, I exalted. Although I am faithless, I love my new New York. I can recite the Stabat Mater, also Kaddish. I love rocking my great bony babies away in my arms, Demerol tucked in their cheeks, or easing them onto the stallions withers, and clapping them off for that final gallop over the desert. Oh, may we all come out as softly dead as they on the other side. Here's a little poem called Historic Blacksburg, Virginia. I gave a reading at Virginia Tech and my hosts took me to the river where I observed the Caboose that is still there. Historic Blacksburg, Virginia. The lavatory sign still reads

colored on one side and white on the other. In the old Caboose that used to trail the raveled skein of freight cars full of West Virginia coal. Whoever entered had to flip his designation right side up, then brace against the track before unbuttoning back to the door and pissing down the same foul hole. This is called The Burners The Barriers. Of course the way I pronounce barriers, it's going to sound like strawberries to you but that's what we say. And here again, these are in rhyming couplets. Everything I leave behind me burn unread, wrote Kafka to Max Brod, Petrarch consigned 1000 worksheets he said to Vulcan for correction, and Henry James and a fit of depression burned his correspondence with the magisterial Edith. We might have lost the whole Aeneas had Augustus not overridden Virgil's deathbed request. Plato as well. mistrusting his second epistle, declared it should be set a fire. But Alexander Pope asked everyone to send his letters back again, so he could elaborate upon them for a publication. When Prussian soldiers threatened to storm the gates in 1871. flow bear burned what was thought to be a packet from Luis Calais, and far too hastily. Dante Gabriel Rossetti grief stricken when she overdosed on laudanum buried all his yet unpublished work with wife Elizabeth. Seven years elapsed until his will overtook his will. Good friends then exhumed his manuscript from her grisly room, but it was the Russian poets who know how to dig a hole for take a match to hoard paper make do with scratches on a bar of soap, who smuggled out besmirched and pided, their, serelics of rage and hope, excoriating lines we weep to read, yet leave them no less dead. Osip Mandelstam sentenced for his stolen epigram Vasil stus, buried with others sex along the Padma rail line, assigned a stone with number but no name. So little rescued for posterity. Everything I leave behind me, hold fast, keep dry. These are getting very dark. I'm aware of that. And so I think the time has come. Well, this has got definite two but what is one to do? This is called the Sunday Phone all. Drab December sleek, falling dogs loosely fisted and torpor, horses nose down in hay. It's the hour years ago, I used to call my parents or they'd call me. The phone rings idly empty of expectation. I answer. It's my father's voice. Pop by say you're dead. Don't you remember that final heart attack Dallas, just before Kennedy was shot. Time means nothing here kiddo. He's jolly expansive. You can wait aeons for an open line. Time gets used up but comes back, you know like ping pong. Ping Pong. The table in the attic. My father shirtsleeves rolled the wet stub of a burnt out cigarette stuck to his lower lip as he murdered each of my three older brothers and me yearning under the eaves waiting for my turn. You sound just like yourself. I say. I am myself. Goddamnit. Anyway, what's this about an accident? How did you hear about it? I read it somewhere broke your neck, et cetera. He says this vaguely his shorthand way of keeping feelings at bay. You mean you read my memoir? Did you know you're in it? didn't read that part? No reason to stir things up. Now I'm indignant, but I almost died. Didn't I tell you never buy land on a hill? it's worthless. What's an educated Dame like you doing messing with horses? messing with horses is for punks. Then a little softer. I see you to put a lot of work into that hunk of real estate. Thanks. Thanks for even noticing. We love it here. We'll never sell like hell you won't you will. Pop I say tearing up. Let's not fight

for ones. My only papa. When do I get to see you a long pause, then coughing his cigarette cough option he says I may be dead but I'm not clairvoyant. Behave yourself. The line clicks off. Now this is a little more upbeat, even though it does doesn't start out that way. It's called Women and Horses and the little epigraph says after Auschwitz to ride upon is barbaric, and that was Theodore Adorno. After Auschwitz after 10 of my father's can, the ones who stayed starved then were gassed in the camps after Vietnam, after Korea, Kuwait, Somalia, Haiti, Afghanistan, after the towers, this late in the life of our haplessly orbiting world, let us celebrate whatever scraps the Muse that naked child can pluck from the still smoldering dumps. If there's a liar around, strike it, a body stand back give it air. Let us have sparrows laying their eggs in Bluebird boxes. Let us have bluebirds, in societally nesting elsewhere. Lend us naval Baird, teens, eyebrow and nose ringed prodigies, crumbling breakfast bagels over dog eared and jelly smeared texts allow the able bodied among us to have steamy sex. But there'll be fat old ladies and flowery tent dresses at bridge tables, howling babies and dirty diapers and babies serenely at rest. War and detente will go on detente, and renewed tearing asunder. We can never break free from the dark and degrading past. Let us see life again. Nevertheless, in the words of Isaac baybel, as a meadow over which women and horses wander. This is called Which One. Couplets again, I are the driver of the Chevrolet pulsing beside me at a traffic light, the chrome haired woman in the checkout line chatting up the acne clerk, the clot of kids smoking on the sly in the Mile High pizza parking lot. The meter reader, the roofer at work next door, a senior citizen stabbing the sidewalk with his three pronged cane. Which one Have you discarded in a bag sealed with duct tape in the middle of the road, three puppies four or five weeks old, who flung two kittens from a moving car at midnight into a snowbank where the person trailing you observe the leg and tail of the Calico one that lived and if not you, someone flossing her teeth or watering his lawn across the street. I look for you wherever I go. I'm going to read another bear with me another bear poem. And this poem is intensely autobiographical. We do get a lot of black bear. We live in the woods in Central New Hampshire and our nearest neighbor is half a mile in any direction. And this is what happens. It's called Seven Caveats in May. When the dog whines at 5 a.m., do not make your first mistake and let him out. When he starts to bark in a furious tom-tom rhythm and you can just discern a shadowy feinting taking place under the distant hemlocks do not seize the small sledge from the worktable and fly out there in your nightgown and unlaced high tops preparing to whack this, the ninth of its kind in the last four weeks, over the head before it can quill your canine. But it's not a porcupine: it's a big, black, angry bear. Now your dog has put him up a tree and plans to keep him there, a perfect piece of work by any hound. Do not run back and grab the manure fork thinking you can keep the prongs between you and the elevated bear long enough to dart in and corral your critter. Isn't it true bears come down slower than they go up? Half an hour later do not give up, go in the house and call the cops. The dispatcher regrets having to report there's no patrol car at this time, the state police are covering. No doubt the nearest

trooper, wearing his Smoky Bear Stetson is forty miles up the highway. When your closest neighbor, big burly Smitty worms his way into his jeans and roars up your dirt road in his four-wheel diesel truck strides over the slash pile and hauls your hound back (by now, you've thrown something on over your not-quite-diaphanous nightgown) do not forget to thank him with a sixpack. Do not fail to take your feeders in on April One despite the arriving birds' insistent clamor and do not put them out again until the first of December. I'm going to read one more political problem of social importance. I was invited to Los Angeles to give a reading at the Skirball Museum. And after that was over, the museum had closed but the assistant director asked a docent to take me around, so I got to see the exhibits. And we came into this one room and I could not believe my eyes and I bet you don't know about this either. It certainly was not taught in American history. 101 This poem is called The Jew Order. So I've done what poets do. I took the event and I transposed it back into my own adolescence. So this is 10th grade, The Jew Order. Mr. Welshan was a dusty, disappointed man. He taught American history to my 10th grade class, and was famous for his stringent pop quizzes. The points have his shirt color splayed out on happily on either side of his fat ties. Not a single girl in the room had a crush on him. This was an upscale High School in the suburbs at a time when men wore suits and women skirts below the knee. Because my mother was ambitious for me. I commuted on two trolleys, an hour each way. Half of the student body was Jewish, a quarter black, the football team with was salt and pepper, heavy on the pepper. We yonder way through the Civil War, the dates of battles the burning of Atlanta, Sherman's march to the sea. For one black regiment that fought on the union side. The surrender appomattox, Ulysses S. Grant, a splendid classical name, we knew he drank too much. That fact was in the history book, but not the Jew order that he issued out of Oxford, Mississippi in 1862. expelling all Jews as a class from union territory in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys within 24 hours of receipt of this command for violating every regulation of trade. Had we talked about how few Jews live then in the south, most of them merchants and traders, some of them daring to smuggle cotton up north to bring in flowers or shoes, salt or medicine for the desperate Confederate households risking death by hanging to slip past the blockhead. Had we heard for example of the woman in Richmond before their dodgy shipments being charged \$70 for a barrel of flour, who exclaimed My god, I have seven children, how am I to feed them all? to whom? The shopkeeper replied, I do not know, Madam, unless you eat your children. Young as we were had we read further, that any Jews who remained would be held in confinement as prisoners, except that Maurice Hoffman of St. Louis, together with his little cluster of B'nai brith brothers threw themselves on the bosom of our father Abraham, in the name of religious liberty and justice, asking him to annul that order, and protect his humblest constituents. Wouldn't we have looked at one another? Wouldn't we have felt the smallest spasm of national pride when Lincoln said, This protection you shall have he revoked the Jew decree. The same month he signed the Emancipation. Young as we were had we read these terms exchanges, wouldn't we have looked at one another

black kids at white and vice versa, sharing our adolescent fury at injustice, our radical innocence, our masturbatory guilt? Wouldn't we all have looked at Mr. Welshan, who was there to teach and guide us in his boredom. He at the blackboard at the front of the room, we in our restless alphabetically integrated rows for calling the roll? Wouldn't we all have looked at one another, with a heady momentary taste of solidarity? I'm going to close with the title poem. This is not a cheerful poem either. Jack. I should say before I read it that the horses in this poem are a year older now. I wrote this poem a couple of years back and I upped their age a year at that time, and now they have passed it gone beyond How pleasant the yellow butter melting on white kernels, the meniscus of red wine that coats the insides of our goblets where we sit with sturdy friends as old as we are after shucking the garden's last Silver Queen and setting husks and stalks aside for the horses the last two of our lives, still noble to look upon: our first foal, now a bossy mare of 28 which calibrates to 84 in people years and my chestnut gelding, not exactly a youngster at 22. Every year, the end of summer lazy and golden, invites grief and regret: suddenly it's 1980, winter batters us, winds strike like cruelty out of Dickens. Somehow we have seven horses for six stalls. One of them, a big-nosed roan gelding, calm as a president's portrait lives in the rectangle that leads to the stalls. We call it the motel lobby. Wise old campaigner, he dunks his hay in the water bucket to soften it, then visits the others who hang their heads over their dutch doors. Sometimes he sprawls out flat to nap in his commodious quarters. That spring, in the bustle of grooming and riding and shoeing, I remember I let him go to a neighbor I thought was a friend, and the following fall she sold him down the river. I meant to but never did go looking for him, to buy him back and now my old guilt is flooding this twilight table my guilt is ghosting the candles that pale us to skeletons the ones we must all become in an as yet unspecified order. Oh Jack, tethered in what rough stall alone did you remember that one good winter? Thank you.

R

Rebecca Hoogs 48:24

We'll return for the rest of the event with Maxine Kumin in a moment. But first I wanted to tell you about an event coming up with Alberto Rios on May 28. Alberto Rios is the author of 14 collections of poetry, including *2020s*, *Not Go Away is My Name*. Rios has garnered acclaim as a writer whose magical storytelling evokes the unexpected in the familiar reflects his Chicano heritage and celebrates the power of community. Digital passes for this online event started \$10 and are available at [lectures.org](https://lectures.org). And now more from Maxine Kumin.

M

Margit Rankin 49:13

Thank you, Maxine. That was great. I have a number of questions. And I thought I'd start off with a question about women and poetry. You've written eloquently about your sort of

emerging feminist sensibilities. And you've also remarked somewhere I couldn't remember where I read it, but that when speaking recently, you've met young woman who declare with great confidence that there is no need for activism on that front. And so in your lifetime, you've both witnessed and been an integral part of the changing consciousness of women's roles in our society. And I wonder if you would talk a little bit about how you defined feminist poetics if that's what you'd like to call it or, or how you see your work as a woman writing today.

M

**Maxine Kumin 49:59**

I don't know that. I could define the feminist poetics particularly. But I could say what I see my role as today as kind of an elder, feminist poet. And that is to encourage and, and make myself available to younger women, writers coming along. And I feel a special affinity with women who have struggled for many, many years to publish a book, and have maybe one, in fact, I know of several cases of one a first book contest in their 50s. So I try to make myself available in these situations, I have a kind of cut off of 40 blurbs a year. When I get up there, I feel I really have to pull back. But it's true in my lifetime, I've seen it. It's kind of astonishing to think that when I was starting out to write serious poems, many women poets were hiding behind their first initials in order to get published. And we were told things like, Oh, you write like a man, that was a big compliment. You were also told, when you got them to the airport in the nick of time for their plane, the departing poet would say to you, you drive like a man. And that was another great compliment. I've told this story often enough, John Chardee was the then poetry editor of the Saturday Review of Literature. And he sent back three of my poems and said, Gee, I really wanted to print one of these. But you know, I printed a woman last month and my editor who was then Norman Cousins, would not let me print another woman for at least three months. And, you know, I just accepted it. That was the way things were. My saying for that is there was a man so poor, he fell in love with jail. Well, we can say there was a woman so poor, she fell in love with you. You know, that was the status quo. So times have changed enormously. the playing field is not I would say, quite level. There are virtually no women editors of major literary magazines. And I have seen editorships come up, for example, at the Georgia Review, at Kenyon Review, and I'm sure at other places, and I have seen well qualified women, either not considered or passed over and equally qualified men, of course, get the positions, simply because it is thought that the general public will be more accepting of a male editor than of a female editor. So I think, you know, we still have a way to go and I do have to say to that my I glances down the table of contents of an anthology, or a new book, there's a new book out, 14 on Form. And I think there's one woman maybe two. But you know, you look at that and you say to yourself, women are certainly writing as many poems as men are writing, and they're certainly just as good. So why this disparity? What is going on here? And I guess it will continue to go on for a while.

But Carolyn Kaiser and I banded together to overthrow the Academy of American poets, chancellor, we call them chancellorships, chancellorhoods. priories, maybe that would be better, where they could hold a 12 year term and then be reelected for another 12. So it was a real sinecure. And we resigned in protest when we were unable to get the the chancellor's to agree to accept a woman of color as a chancellor, and the New York Times picked up the cudgels and it was a it was quite glorious to see I mean, we got a lot of press I can't believe how much press we got. So there's a whole new set of rules in place now where they rotate every three years and just about everybody now has been a chancellor is going to be a chancellor or once was a chancellor. A much better situation and and it's ethnically very diverse.

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Margit Rankin 54:42

That's a lot of progress. And I have another question just about genres. In addition to poetry. You've written short stories and novels and memoirs and criticism and you return most frequently to poetry. I wonder how your writing practice is different for those other genres, and is there something about poetry that you find more sustaining?

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Maxine Kumin 55:08

Well, actually at a AWP in Vancouver, just about a week ago, there was a panel discussion, precisely was called passionate threads. And there were several of us who wrote in other genres. And I spoke a little bit about my own development. And I said that I am, of course, a poet first and forever. The other things that I have written have come out of what I call over-inch, not over-age, but over hyphen, you know, leftover material that would not fit in the, in the compass of a poem, and so has spilled out, for example, into short stories, or, indeed into novels. And that's how that has happened for me. I really do not see a great line of demarcation between writing poetry and writing in the other genres, they are all words, and that you kind of have the same obligation in whatever genre you're working in, to tell it, at least for me to tell the truth, but tell it slant. You have to make art of it. And that's what isn't that what Nietzsche said, we have, we have art in order not to die of the truth, which is a great line. And it really does apply, I think it applies more to poetry than to the other genres because there's more compression, and there's more. I shouldn't say there's more passion, but there certainly is like, stones grinding on each other in a poem. And you don't have to have that same tension, you have a little more room for your over-edge, and short story or in fiction. And in essay, you know, the essay makes its own rules.

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Margit Rankin 57:08

I'd like to talk a little bit, you just alluded to the stones grinding against each other. And I

have a question about form, as you're always complimented for your technical mastery, and you're really an elegant formalist. And you've said that form is important, especially when confronting an intimate subject, that somehow it allows you to be more direct. And I wonder if you could explain how that works?

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Maxine Kumin 57:30

Well, the advantage of form is that it takes away some of the decision making. If you're working in an established form, let's say a sonnet, you know, let's say you're writing a Shakespearean sonnet. So you're going to write, you're going to write for quatrains. Hopefully, each of them will contain a particular image. And then you're going to, you're going to end with a rhyming couplet. And I should have read the final parliament in the Jack book, and it's about Mrs. Dalloway, which I re-read. I don't even think I read it when I read it, if you know what I mean. And when I have something particularly personal, are particularly difficult to say, I tend to try to cram it into a formal setting. Because there is this wonderful paradox there is the paradoxical freedom of working in form. It gives you permission to say the hard truths, as it were, at least it does that for me. Free versus much, much dicier when I'm working in free verse, and I do write a fair amount of it. I feel as though I'm somewhere in Indiana, you know, with a 360 degree horizon, and my eyelids have been pinned open, and I can't blink. And that's much harder to handle than say, writing in iarabic tetrameter.

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Margit Rankin 59:07

You've written a lot about your life on the farm, and, of course, what you see and what you live with. But critics and readers have often noticed the special covenant, if you will, between you and your environment, and I guess this is the opposite of that form question. It's really a content question. Can you imagine yourself writing without nature as prompt? And if so, how would your poetry be different?

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Maxine Kumin 59:35

I guess I can't really answer that question because I've never done it. But I'm sure I would still be writing poetry. And it might just take a slightly different tacy. Actually, a lot of my very early poems, the poems in halfway, for example, are much less reliant on that covenant with the earth, or whatever we want to call it, I don't really like to call it anything as fancy as a covenant. And they're, they're rather, they're quite formal and the language is rather Latiniate. And I think as I have matured as a writer, my language has gotten bonier and perhaps tougher. And maybe it should be even sparer than it is, I was thinking that as I read today, reading lines that I thought I could have done without this line,

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Margit Rankin 1:00:41

in the in the chapter, motherhood and poetics endings and always been getting a collection of essays. You noted that when you first started writing, you had little children, and you wrote between housework and chauffeuring. And then you said, even today, much of my best writing time takes place in what I think of the interstices. No wonder if you talk about that. How do you create brain space for that?

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Maxine Kumin 1:01:07

You travel and in O'Hare for two hours, or you could get an awful lot of work done in airports because you're totally anonymous. Well, of course, now, with cell phones, people can get at you. But if you don't turn your cell phone on, they can't. And so it is a quiet space, in the midst of the bustle and the confusion, you can go into yourself in a way that perhaps is more difficult to do when you're on your home turf. And I'm never very far from a notepad and a pen. Even though I am a convert, I've learned to work on the computer. I'm ashamed to admit it. I have a funny story to tell. We were talking at the dinner table about the days of typewriters and second sheets and carbon paper. And my 15 year old grandson looked at me and said, What's carbon paper. So we've come such a long way we all take the computer so for granted. I tried to make myself print out and not revise on the screen. But it takes discipline to do that. It's so easy to change things that you can lose your early impulse, that first draft just vanishes, unless you're strict about it. So you know, I take my quiet time where I can find it. If I'm at the farm, I'm there's just so much that needs to be done. I don't, unless it's raining. A student once pointed out to me that it rains and about two thirds of my poems. The raining interstices

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Margit Rankin 1:02:58

I have a question about your relationship with Anne Sexton, you were her closest friend and shared your work and lives daily for I think 17 years until her suicide. And one tends to think of poetry as a solitary enterprise. But I wonder if you could talk about how that poetic friendship influenced your work.

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Maxine Kumin 1:03:19

It made a huge difference. And of course, it is so called solitary enterprise. But every poet I know has three or four confidants with whom he or she trades worksheets. So it isn't all that solitary. Anne and I had the advantage of living in the same suburb outside of Boston, at a time when for \$4.80, you could put in a second line. As long as your calls were contiguous, and we were contiguous. Because we live, we both lived in Newton Highlands,

we could connect in the morning and stay connected all day at no extra charge. So we use the phone. Well, I don't know how to explain what we used it for. But we used it so extensively that sometimes when we saw each other, and would look at the poem in process on the page, one of us would say to the other, so this is what it looks like, because we had gotten so used to hearing it, and it's very good way to train your ear, I must say to listen to drafts on the phone. Well, we were housewives, we had small children. We met in a poetry workshop at the Boston Center for Adult Education. We commuted into the city together once a week. And little by little we developed our own poetry workshop with George Starbuck and John Holmes and Sam Albert. And we met every other week in one another's homes. It was a house and time. Although, I'm not sure that either one of us realized it. We didn't know we were making history, we were just making poems and being very close personal and very close professional friends.

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Margit Rankin 1:05:10

You've said that Auden was your biggest influence and written about a number of other poets as well Frost, Moore, Hopkins, Wordsworth, Rukeyser, Roca, I was surprised to learn yesterday that you've been working on translating and as yet unknown Russian Israeli poet and also have project translating perhaps or Belgian writer as well. And I wonder who do you gravitate towards these days? Whodo you read.

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Maxine Kumin 1:05:40

There's so much to read, there's such a plethora of material out there. I tend to go back and reread old favorites. I never tire of reading Auden. I find that Carl Shapiro stands up very well to scrutiny. Elizabeth Bishop, also. And then I like to go all the way back and read John Donne and read George Herbert, and so on. And there's a great deal of sustenance for me in that I have so many poems in my head, I have this, you know, vast inner library. And sometimes it needs a little refreshing. I have an awful lot of Edna Mulay in my head and also Hauseman, nobody reads Hausman anymore. But I have probably seven or eight Hausman poems that I could do just like that. But there's something about internalizing the rhythm of rhymed poetry that is unconsciously a valuable tool, I don't think I could really put my finger on it just to say that you absorb these rhythms, almost by osmosis. And they're always there when you're working on your own poems. They're kind of a shadow behind what you're doing.

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Margit Rankin 1:07:18

Have time for another question. And this might be an unsurprising question to you in that you've always been physically active, you were a competitive swimmer and a competitive

writer. And although in your poems, it really was only alluded to a little bit, It certainly was in the program, you had an accident six years ago, that was near fatal, and your recovery was truly exceptional. And you've published an account of that recovery process and tie the Halo and beyond wonder if you could talk a little bit about the role writing played in your recovery.

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Maxine Kumin 1:07:55

It was my daughter, who was instrumental in pulling this book out of me. I started out quadriplegic. And it was amazing. I've gotten an awful lot back. But as you're well aware of the fact that I list to the left and that part of my right side doesn't function terribly well. But I'm getting by. When I was in the rehab hospital, I was in a halo, you know, this thing that screwed into your skull. My daughter took an unpaid leave from the UN, and came back to the states and she came to the hospital every day with her laptop. And she said, you always said nothing is ever all for nothing, mom. So you talk and I'll type and we'll get at least get an article out of it. So that was the supposition, the hypothesis that we worked on. And she she told me subsequently that she thought of it simply as therapy to try to relieve some of my depression over my terrible physical state. And little by little this book evolved. Well, Judith returned to her occupation, I don't even know what country she was in at that point. She was somewhere. She's always somewhere. Right now. She's in Belgium, but I don't know where she was. I think she was in Germany, then. I was left with the skeletal outline of this book and my editor at Norton, Carol Smith, kept making suggestions. Actually, they were admonitions, make it more interesting, put more dialogue in it. It's got to be more personal than this or it'll never work and that was how this book, The Inside The Halo and Beyond came into being. May I never write another one like it One memoir is enough for lifetime.

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Margit Rankin 1:10:04

Thank you so much, Maxine. Thank you all for coming.

R

Rebecca Hoogs 1:10:22

It was a joy to hear from Maxine Kumin in 2005. And to share her reading on the podcast today, thank you to the Seattle Arts & Lecture staff, board and community and thanks all of you for listening. This show would not be possible without you. Our show is produced by Jack Straw Cultural Center with theme music by Daniel Spells. To hear more, subscribe wherever you get your podcast. While you're there, rate and review us five stars so that more people can enjoy SAL/On Air.

