"Becoming a Poet"

AN INTERVIEW WITH GAIL MAZUR

By Lloyd Schwartz

ABOVE: GAIL MAZUR READING HER WORK ON WGBH RADIO'S *THE MASSACHUSETTS POETRY SERIES*, 1976
BELOW: GAIL MAZUR AND LLOYD SCHWARTZ AT BLACKSMITH HOUSE, 1982
FACING PAGE: GAIL MAZUR, FEBRUARY 17, 2008 PHOTO © ELSA DORFMAN

I **met Gail Mazur in 1975.** I wanted to do a poetry reading at the Blacksmith House—the remarkable reading series that she founded and ultimately ran for twenty-nine years. Gail liked my poems well enough to offer me a reading. And I admired her poems, too. I'd been going to Robert Lowell's "office hours" at Harvard (essentially an open workshop—anyone who knew about them could attend). I asked Gail if she'd like to go. She became one of the regulars (who included such now-distinguished poets as Frank Bidart and Robert Pinsky) and we became friends. When Chris Busa invited me to interview Gail for *Provincetown Arts*, I was delighted. I could ask her about all the things we never talked about, and discovered in the process that although we'd known each other for more than thirty years, and talked frequently (sometimes every day), there were still things about her I didn't know.

Did you ever want to be anything other than a poet?

I wanted to be an artist when I was a child. As much as I wanted to be or thought I could be anything. I thought for sure I'd have to be a teacher or a social worker—I couldn't imagine that.

Really? I didn't know that.

I had two aunts I loved—my father's sisters—who were art majors. One was an amateur artist. The other had done some pencil portraits of my grandfather, which I thought were wonderful. She taught me some techniques, which was really exciting. I could draw curly hair! I was about six or seven. I never had a set of watercolors or anything like that—just pencil and notebooks. I tried to draw boxes, teacups, eyes and eyebrows, things like that. My friend Merle and I would sit on the floor and copy ads for fur coats (her father was an illustrator for the *Globe* or the *Traveler*). We drew them in sort of modules. We made lozenges and piled them on top of one another horizontally. Joan Crawford, wide-shoulder fur coats. Cats. I had a little book about how to draw cats. At one time, we had thirty-eight cats. My brother and I found a stray cat, and we fed her Cheerioats and milk and named her Hidey, because she hid when we came out (we didn't know about Heidi yet). Every once in a while we could give a kitten away, but, mostly, nobody wanted them. My poor father had to drown some of the litters while I cried as if he were a murderer. We were the only cat people and the only Jews in the neighborhood. I drew more from the cat book than from the cats.

Did you ever follow up on this?

Not really. I took one art class in high school. In college I was drawing portraits in my dorm room instead of studying: self-portraits, and Beckett and Dylan Thomas, who were on the covers of some books I loved, *Waiting for Godot* and Thomas's *Collected*. Dylan Thomas—he looked like an angel, an angel smoking a cigarette. There was always someone calling me "the poet" even though I didn't write poetry. My freshman English teacher at Smith called me "Stephen Dedalus." I can't explain it but people must have thought I exuded a kind of existential lostness (existentialism was hot then). I wasn't on the same track as the other women in the school, all those girls wanting to get their "Mrs. degree." I wore black turtlenecks. I wanted to look like Juliette Greco. I thought I was courting disaster all the time. I never did anything on time, cutting classes, not studying, hanging out in jazz clubs. I couldn't even pass the Phys Ed requirement. Woody Allen said 99 percent of life is showing up—I never showed up. That's probably why I still have those classic college nightmares. But I took it as a compliment from my literature professor. It seemed that poetry might be a fit. Then Mike and I got married in my senior year, and I had Kathe and Danny by the time I was twenty-three.

When did you start reading poetry seriously? When did you start enjoying poetry?

Probably in college—we were taught from elementary school to memorize poems. I assumed everyone liked that. Later I memorized some Shakespeare sonnets and I tacked them up on my wall at home. I loved those Shakespeare sonnets so much and kept saying them over and over to myself and looking at them on my wall. I never thought I wanted to write poetry. But one night I tried a sonnet. I didn't have a whole lot to say, so I thought I would elevate my language. It was so unlike me, so not *me*, that I remember I was standing in my parents' room and I told my mother I wrote this sonnet, and I handed it to her. I never showed her anything I did, my homework or anything. I was rather secretive, and she wasn't one for lavish praise. (Remember what Kathe said when you won the Pulitzer Prize? That if they gave Pulitzer Prizes for criticism, how come Mildred never got one?)

GIRL IN A LIBRARY

. . . But my mind, gone out in tenderness,
Shrinks from its object . . .
—Randall Jarrell

I want to find my way back to her,
to help her, to grab her hand, pull her
up from the wooden floor of the stacks
where she's reading accounts of the hatchet
murders of Lizzie Borden's harsh parents
as if she could learn something about
life if she knew all the cuts and slashes;

her essay on Wordsworth or Keats
only a knot in her belly, a faint pressure
at her temples. She's pale, it's five years
before the first migraine, but the dreamy
flush has already drained from her face.
I want to lead her out of the library,
to sit with her on a bench under a still

living elm tree, be *one who understands,*
but even today I don't understand,
I want to shake her and want to assure her,
to hold her—but love's not safe for her,
although she craves what she knows
of it, love's a snare, a closed door,
a dank cell. Maybe she should just leave

the campus, take a train to Fall River,
inspect Lizzie's room, the rigid corsets
and buttoned shoes, the horsehair sofas,
the kitchen's rank stew. Hell. Bleak
loyal judgmental journals of a next-door
neighbor—not a friend, Lizzie had no friend.
If only she could follow one trajectory

of thought, a plan, invent a journey
out of this place, a vocation—
but without me to guide her, where
would she go? And what did I ever offer,
what stiffening of spine? What goal?
Rather, stiffening of soul, her soul
cocooned in the library's trivia.

Soul circling its lessons. What can I say
before she walks like a ghost in white lace
carrying her bouquet of stephanotis,
her father beaming innocently at her side,
a boy waiting, trembling, to shape her?
He's innocent, too, we are all innocent,
even Lizzie Borden who surely did take

the axe. It was so hot that summer morning.
The hardhearted stepmother, heavy hand
of the father. There was another daughter
they favored, and Lizzie, stewing at home,
heavy smell of mutton in the pores
of history. But this girl, her story's
still a mystery—I tell myself she's a quick

study, a survivor. There's still time.
Soon she'll close the bloody book,
slink past the lit carrels, through
the library's heavy door to the world.
Is it too late to try to touch her,
kneel beside her on the dusty floor
where we're avoiding her assignment?

Having gone to Radcliffe as a first-generation American and having been an English major was a big thing to her, her favorite time. She even went to law school for a while during the Depression. She read the poem and she said: "I couldn't have done that." I was stunned—thrilled and terrified. The only thing I remember now about the sonnet was that I used the word *supernal*. I assumed she was impressed by that word, but even then I thought it was a phony move. I think I was probably browsing in the dictionary and thought it would put the poem over the top. If I hadn't used it, I probably wouldn't remember showing it to my mother now. It was a first lesson to myself about not being false—even if someone approved of it. At the same time there was the thrill of using words you've never used. Then it was two years before I wrote another poem.

When I was seventeen, a friend took me to this outdoor event at Brandeis honoring William Carlos Williams. The speakers were Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, Richard Wilbur, Louise Bogan, W. S. Merwin, and William Carlos Williams. I remember it as if it were a panoramic picture called "The Pantheon of American Poets." Williams must have already had several strokes. I remember him wearing an eye patch. I was mesmerized by Robert Lowell. That same year, my brother, who was a student at Harvard, got me tickets to hear T. S. Eliot read at Sanders Theater. It was completely filled and they piped in the reading to Memorial Hall. He wasn't a thrilling reader, and I couldn't see him, but the situation was thrilling.

What about in college? Did you do any writing?

I did, but my generation of women, the fifties Feminine Mystique generation, had no support for its ambitions. So, there was an unreality to the very idea of being anything but a teacher or social worker. I took a workshop with Anthony Hecht. I remember his reading us a new poem about the Third Avenue El, which had been torn down. He described the light as "Rembrandt dark." And a poem about his wife's miscarriage. About myself I remember nothing.

Why did you take that workshop?

I must have wanted to write poetry. I didn't have any friends in college who wrote poetry. My boyfriend was a jazz musician. I had a correspondence with a Harvard student I'd gone to camp with. One requirement of it was that we had to quote Auden in every letter.

What's the first thing you remember about actually writing?

Everything was done late and in a panic when I was in college. Everything was a huge mountain to climb, even writing a poem, I didn't know I was in despair and afraid to fail or succeed. My classmates thought I was a daredevil, a master of brinksmanship. But I was afraid I wouldn't be ANYTHING. Mike and I got married in the middle of my senior year. Later, when I was twenty-five, and my children were little, I hired a babysitter in the morning, and I tried to write fiction. But I wanted to write sentences, not stories. I had no fictional imagination, even though I read fiction all the time. Elsa [Dorfman], whom I had known since I was nine, brought me a book by Robert Creeley—*For Love*—which completely puzzled and stymied me. I'm trying to put these few little clues together, because I didn't really start writing poems until I moved to Cambridge. My brother had given me the Variorum Yeats for a wedding gift. Everyone was calling me a poet, but I never called myself one. What made him give me this? Somebody gave Mike that amazing three-volume *Letters of Van Gogh*. Even then, everyone knew Mike was an artist. In those letters, Van Gogh was always trying to describe to his brother, Theo, what he was working on—all the struggle of making art, and the hopefulness and exhilaration of it. Theo was all he had for encouragement, and the letters to his brother were a brilliant expression of the soul of an artist's pure struggle. In Cambridge, Ellie brought me into the Grolier [the legendary poetry bookshop in Harvard Square]. And something just clicked about my life and who I was. "Girl in a Library" really describes what it was like to be me before then. And "The Horizontal Man." I had no context for imagining writing poetry.

So how did you come to think of yourself as a possible poet? What made the difference?

When I walked into the Grolier and here was this old man [the proprietor, Gordon Cairnie] sitting on a lumpy old couch with a letter from Ezra

Pound sticking up from between the cushions that had probably been there for twenty years. It had that sign on the door: ONLY POETRY NO TEXTBOOKS NO FICTION. Gordon took to me. Partly because he had this terrible thing happen in the forties—he'd been driving and struck and killed a little girl named Gail. He always called me Henry. It was a men's club, but he was a great romantic about poetry—he accepted everything. For me, it was like having a third parent—one who loved poetry and loved you. And, of course, wasn't blighted by family history. Whoever was hanging around there then, I met. While my kids were in day camp, I would stay there all afternoon then rush home with new books and make supper. In the morning I found myself writing poems. Which is why I never underestimate how for some people isolation can kill the courage to write. If I was going to be a poet, wouldn't I have known it? What if I hadn't moved to Cambridge? Did I have the DNA?

GAIL WITH (L TO R) FRANK BIDART, STANLEY KUNITZ, MARK DOTY, AND CARL PHILLIPS AT THE FAVORITE POEM READING, FINE ARTS WORK CENTER, 1999 PHOTO © DOUG MACOMBER

But you must have.

After that summer in the Grolier, with my permissive schedule, that was it! I didn't call myself a poet, but that was what I wanted to be doing, and that was what I did.

Did you show anyone your poems?

There was a young poet living in our house named Bill Ferguson and he was very encouraging. My poems were very minimal—very short, all short lines. Extremely impersonal. I had to teach myself, I didn't go to school. I found Frank O'Hara. The day after he was killed on Fire Island, my undisciplined puppy chewed up the copy of *Lunch Poems* I'd left on the coffee table. I was reading Ginsberg—even before I graduated. I struggled with Pound and Eliot. I was memorizing poems. But the Grolier just gave me a chance to pick up everything and look in it. I met Jim Tate there—the summer before *The Lost Pilot* [Tate's extraordinary first book] came out. He would recite those poems to me. Everything was coming together.

Did you think about publishing?

I thought—someday I'd like to publish a poem in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Only one. I didn't have a big ambition. I was so happy to have found what I wanted to do. I was twenty-eight. Only later did I understand ambition was a flesh-eating thing. Getting a poem accepted fits with what Mike calls his Ta-Da! Theory. When you get good career news—a prize, a publication—that moment, that "Ta-Da!" is as good as it gets. What comes next is a letdown compared to the thrill of the news. The best part is while you're in the living process of a poem, working on it. Nobody is there with you in the Zone. Pessoa says in a poem, "My being a poet is my way of being alone." It's heady—exhilarating—to make the thing, to try to make it better, to get it. To be walking around and having to jot things on pieces of paper in your pocket. To write down notes that you could build a poem from.

When did that isolation turn into community?

It began when I moved to Cambridge. When I had written a few poems. The first one was about Jesse Whitehead, who used to walk around the Square with birds on her shoulders. I don't have a copy of it. It was never occurring to me that anything was a keeper. I was imagining a terrible loneliness. Myself as a lonely elderly eccentric who walked around her city with birds on her shoulders. She had been banned from the Coop because one of her birds pooped on the stationary. Dozens of packages of envelopes, an entire stack, were shat on. Later I learned that young writers thought she was brilliant. They'd meet her in the old Hayes-Bick cafeteria. I think my poem was also expressing the fear of being a poet, and how isolating that was. Of how impossible it was to find fellowship, to have permission to fly. So many women-poet suicides . . . it seemed like a risky business. When we moved to New York for a couple of years, I took a workshop with Isabella Gardner at the 92nd Street Y. We met at her apartment at the Chelsea.

How was that?

There were some good poets in that workshop. Belle herself. Joan Larkin. The Chelsea. It was not Cambridge! A group of us met after that in our loft in the Garment District. I think I have one poem that I kept from those years that was published in an issue of the *Antioch Review*—an issue with Elsa Dorfman's silhouette of Lowell on the cover. I came back to Cambridge in 1972 and a year later Gordon died, and the Grolier was closed and didn't look like it would reopen.

Was that when you started the Blacksmith House series?

I knew the director of the Cambridge Center for Adult Education. I wanted to make sure there was some place for poetry, and she told me Monday nights were available at the Blacksmith House. I was thinking I wanted to have a poetry room. I didn't have a real plan. It was inconceivable to me that I would get up in public every night. I set up three weeks of readings. They were so crowded. I did it from week to week—I had no real plan to keep doing it forever. But I did! And I think it was great for me and for poets around here.

I'll second that. It was a great place to hear poetry—and a great place to read. Thank you for giving me my first reading in Cambridge.

Thank *you*. And when you invited me to go to Lowell's office hours—that was life-changing. I had attended his undergraduate workshop before we moved to New York (1969 or '70). Ellie had said you have to apply to Lowell's workshop—I had met him once at the Grolier. Gordon said, "Cal, this is Gail, she's a poet too." Ta-da! I sent him a several-page-long poem about Cesar Chavez, which included Spanish, which I didn't know. About the grape boycott. Ellie dragged me over to the English department, and my name was on his class list. I wasn't registered or connected to Harvard in any way except that he put me on the list. I think Teddy Kennedy was in the poem, too, speaking Spanish! I went every week.

Lowell's office hours were wonderful, but when I brought a poem it was excruciating. He tore it to shreds—then afterwards told me that it was really haunting him. I never brought another poem, but I didn't care. I loved the conversations, his associative thinking, the lunches at Iruña afterward, the sangria.

BASEBALL

The game of baseball is not a metaphor
and I know it's not really life.
The chalky green diamond, the lovely
dusty brown lanes I see from airplanes
multiplying around the cities
are only neat playing fields.
Their structure is not the frame
of history carved out of forest,
that is not what I see on my ascent.

And down in the stadium,
the veteran catcher guiding the young
pitcher through the innings, the line
of concentration between them,
that delicate filament is not
like the way you are helping me,
only it reminds me when I strain
for analogies, the way a rookie strains
for perfection, and the veteran,
in his wisdom, seems to promise it,
it glows from his upheld glove,

and the man in front of me
in the grandstand, drinking banana
daiquiris from a thermos,
continuing through a whole dinner
to the aromatic cigar even as our team
is shut out, nearly hitless, he is
not like the farmer that Auden speaks
of in Breughel's Icarus,

or the four inevitable woman-hating
drunkards, yelling hugging
each other, and moving up and down
continuously for more beer

and the young wife trying to understand
what a full count could be
to please her husband happy in
his old dreams, or the little boy
in the Yankees cap already nodding
off to sleep against his father,
program and popcorn memories
sliding into the future,
and the old woman from Lincoln, Maine
screaming at the Yankee slugger
with wounded knees to break his leg

this is not a microcosm,
not even a slice of life

and the terrible slumps,
when the greatest hitter mysteriously
goes hitless for weeks, or
the pitcher's stuff is all junk
who threw like a magician all last month,
or the days when our guys look
like Sennett cops, slipping, bumping
each other, then suddenly, the play
that wasn't humanly possible, the Kid
we know isn't ready for the big leagues,
leaps into the air to catch a ball
that should have gone downtown,
and coming off the field is hugged
and bottom-slapped by the sudden
sorcerers, the winning team

the question of what makes a man
slump when his form, his eye,
his power aren't to blame, this isn't
like the bad luck that hounds us,
and his frustration in the games
not like our deep rage
for disappointing ourselves

the ball park is an artifact,
manicured safe, "scene in an Easter egg,"
and the order of the ball game,
the firm structure with the mystery
of accidents always contained,
not the wild field we wander in,
where I'm trying to recite the rules,
to repeat the statistics of the game,
and the wind keeps carrying my words away

GAIL AT SPRING TRAINING WITH THE RED SOX, 1988

Your first book was *Nightfire*.

There was a point in the midseventies where I had a kind of breakthrough. Before then my poems were short and cryptic. I don't think I was influenced by what was in the air—or if I was, it wasn't a real fit. I was struggling with a lot of taboos in writing. Anything autobiographical, anything about my family, taboo. It wasn't that I wanted to write about my family so much—I didn't. But I wrote this really terrible poem in which the speaker writes at her desk and on the shelf above her desk are her mother and father in jars of formaldehyde. Like the Roald Dahl story with the brain and eye in a dish having to watch the widow do everything her husband had hated. But it was as if I had broken a taboo—it could have been any taboo—and freed myself from thinking anything was off-limits. I didn't want to write poems like that one. Soon after that I wrote a poem called "Poison Ivy." I didn't want to tie up the package of a poem before it had even been opened anymore. I felt very liberated by that poem. "Poison Ivy" was autobiographical, but I felt I wasn't trying to do a number on myself or anyone else. I realized as I was writing it that it was also about sexual awakening, that itch. I was delighted with it—it made a real difference for me.

Nightfire was really a chapbook. Most of the poems I was happy not to keep when I put my *Selected* together, but I was happy to have written them at the time. Peter Kaplan [a young poetry enthusiast who later committed suicide] had started this small press and had asked me for a book. I put together a collection ending with "Baseball." "Baseball" was so far ahead of the others. That was the first experience of putting poems together in a book, of shaping the book. I was boosted by Peter asking for it, and he took it.

Was that when he died?

Yes—and then a year later I met David Godine and he asked me if I had a manuscript, and I did.

What triggered "Baseball"?

Some poems come from a lot of notes, some poems come from a line that stays with you, and you keep the music going and growing. "Baseball" wasn't either. I'm a Red Sox fan. I thought, How can I care intensely about something that's so trivial, really? I wasn't alone! You project onto this organism, this team of otherwise ordinary young men. You live through them, their slumps and streaks, their inevitable failures, which aren't quite as painful as your own. The cathartic emotions, the identification with the community. How can you care about

something that much and not want to write a poem? But how do you write a poem from the clichéd position of being a gaga fan? I just puzzled over it. One day, I was lying on my bed reading some fly-by-night poetry magazine, and there were six words in the whole magazine that I wrote down on my legal pad, and I just wrote the poem. Words that don't jump out of the poem at me now. I think *field* was one of them. Maybe *structure*. Maybe *possible*. Not exciting words with a lot of color. I was ready to write the poem and didn't know it. It was the headiest writing experience I ever had. There was no way I could write a poem that says "The game of baseball is a metaphor." It's nothing like "One Art" [Elizabeth Bishop's famous villanelle that has as a refrain line: "The art of losing isn't hard to master"] but it was the same strategy. To deny something in a poem that's true, a truism or cliché—*apophatic!*—poems in which you use the negative to imply the positive. The cliché is that baseball is a metaphor. And I was freed by trying to think why it wasn't a metaphor when it was, to paint the picture of the game as I saw it.

I saw the ballpark as a contemporary Brueghel painting, all these things going on inside it painting the communal life of a time or place. I was just "describing." I see baseball as a human, social drama. The old catcher with all his know-how and the rookie pitcher really taken care of and guided by him. The indifferent fans just there for the party. Parent and child. Rowdy drunks. A whole human story—I had always felt that without conceptualizing it. I wrote a draft in about twenty minutes. And made about four revisions. It was one of those gifts. But it was a gift I was preparing for. I had done what I wanted to do for the first time in a poem—to expand the poem, to layer it as it went on instead of wrapping it up, and tightening. At the same time it was clear to me, and funny, that I had written my most ambitious poem and called it "Baseball"—not "Affliction" or "Hope" or "Failure" or "Work."

GAIL WITH MENSCH, AT HOME IN CAMBRIDGE, 1987

Have you also had this feeling that, Oh, now I've broken through! Now I've got the key! All I have to do is write down six words and magic will strike. Not that I haven't tried it again and again. But every poem seems to be its own world of struggle and klutziness and revision, working or not working.

Your next book was *The Pose of Happiness*. How did that get started?

I remember somebody saying to me: Don't think that the first book makes a difference. But it made a difference to me personally.

Well, now you were an author.

I was a writer, I had a book. I was invited to teach at Emerson for a semester. I had been running the Blacksmith House for five years, and had taught some adult education workshops. *Nightfire* came out six months after Lowell died. He never saw any of those poems. You and I had become friends. I was living in a world. Then it was really poem by poem.

Tell me about "In the Dark Our Story." It's one of my favorites.

It was triggered by *Days of Heaven*. It was a gorgeous movie. And emotionally powerful, haunting. The voice-over narration of the waif, the child actress Linda Manz, who was a homeless kid. The furtiveness of Brooke Adams and Richard Gere pretending to be siblings—the furtiveness adolescent sexuality throbs to. There's an as-if incestuousness. And Sam Shepard had this incredible appeal as the farmer, the older man. Longing, and ruination. That was another poem that I wrote and thought I was in a groove. I would write several poems triggered by movies I loved. A project! The movie triggered intense memories of adolescence.

GAIL AT GROLIER BOOKSTORE, 1978, AT THE PUBLICATION OF *NIGHTFIRE*

That's a subject you come back to from time to time.

Yeah. In "Desire" there's the father looking out from the window in the front door while the speaker's making out in the car. For a long time I felt still near to it. I've been more comfortable writing about sex in a reminiscent way. I'm not implicating anyone. The boys are unnamed. Abstractions. I feel freer.

Eight years went by between those two books. What do you make of that?

Two things. It's not exactly that I write slowly. But I write in spurts the poems I keep. I abandon poems, sometimes for years, sometimes forever. Revision is the sticky part, the great work of our lives as poets. Going back to a poem you've let lie for a year or so, like resuming an affair. Or trying to. Sometimes everything clicks again, sometimes nada. Between those books, my father got sick and died. That not only took some time, but changed the direction of what I would write. And Lowell died.

What was that change of direction?

There was more gravity. Even though I started writing late, I was a young poet for my age in the work of *Nightfire*. My father's illness and death—over a period of fifteen months—not a subject I could get away from. Even though I thought "nada más"—enough of these—the subject crept into every poem I wrote. I was intensely involved with both my parents at that time. And in that time, their house on the Cape was arsonned, and Mike and I built a prefab there in the woods. It was the first time any landscape entered my work. It was my father's landscape, which I really felt strongly after he died. Some of my favorite poems from that book, like "Reading Akhmatova" and the Mashpee poems, were set there, and it was the setting of "Poison Ivy," too. "The Horizontal Man" and "Fallen Angel" were also a couple of my favorite poems from that book where I felt that I had taken something and run with it, that had some of the energy of "Baseball." I felt like I was really sailing when I was writing the first drafts. "Deck of Cards"—another poem about adolescence.

GAIL WITH ROBIN BECKER AT THE FINE ARTS WORK CENTER, 1999

You have a poem called "Baseball," the title of your second book comes from a poem about a movie, your fourth book shares a title with a popular song, and the title poem of your selected poems refers to a Marx brother. You have poems about film noir and murder mysteries. What's the connection for you between poetry and popular culture?

In a way, popular culture was the foundation of what I knew about the world when I was growing up. All the cues to the world outside the family

GAIL AND MICHAEL MAZUR IN PROVINCETOWN, 1959

GAIL MAZUR, ROBERT PINSKY, MICHAEL MAZUR, AND SAM PINSKY-DICKSON IN PROVINCETOWN, 2003

crucible were hidden in it. It was a frame of reference I craved, because most of what I was exposed to I had to sneak in. The radio under my pillow. We weren't allowed to go to movies. There was a sense I always had that movies and music were off in the ozone—slightly off-limits in the household I grew up in.

Did that make it attractive to put in a poem?

You bet. Forbidden fruit—it's the only thing we want to eat. Have to eat. I never put those titles together in that way. Each one meant something different, like the phrasing of "They Can't Take That Away from Me" was always going around in my mind. "The way you wear your hat." I always wanted to start lines repeatedly with "the way"—though when I did, it had nothing of the jaunty bravura of the Ira Gershwin lyric. The poem comes from the dark, not being able to take away the ugliness of being human, that moral dilemma that they can't take away from me. High and low cultural history is a frame of reference—for me, maybe more low than high. All that I think of as popular culture is now antique—"attic culture." I also feel that "Attica" culture should be part of my work, but I don't know how to bring that in.

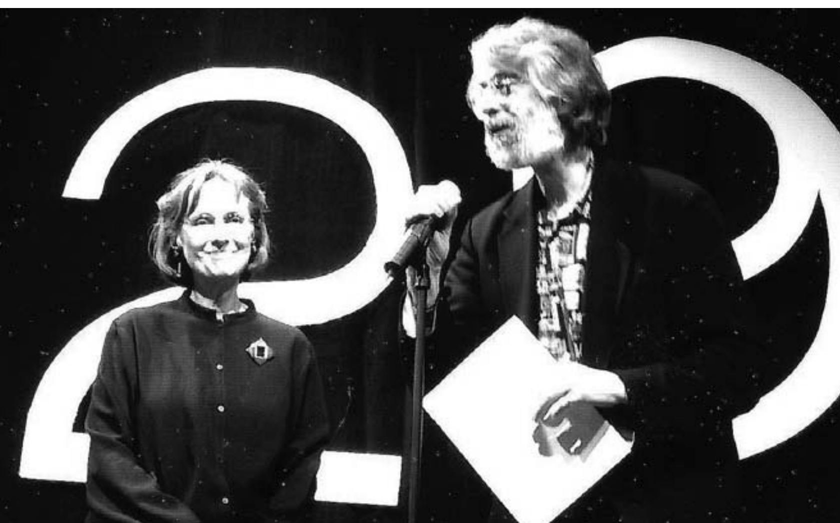
There's a powerful undercurrent of political and social issues in your poems.

It's something that I think about. I actually agree with the Barbra Streisand character in *The Way We Were*: "People are their politics!" For me, the challenge of having what I feel are deeply felt political and social concerns is to find a way to get them into my poems. To use new tools, make new rules for the poems. It's always been mysterious to me that a poem by a poet living under a totalitarian system might seem to have no reference to politics, yet we experience it as profoundly political, which it is. Writing certain things might be proscribed and dangerous, but if it's oblique enough, what Dickinson called "slant," the government wouldn't punish it. We can be direct, but you don't want to be rhetorical. "They Can't Take That Away from Me" started when I heard a report about the cruelty of surgically removing bear bile for a popular cure-all in South China. Bears would live in agony. The poem "The Mission" really seems to channel the voice of the wife of a drafted soldier in World War II, but it really came from thinking about the families of the kids who were sent to Iraq. It wouldn't have been written if the images hadn't come to me as 1940s images. Where I say "you going off to rescue or murder," the idea that the "you" would end up in a dark alley by good angels untenanted (that Poe phrase), it's more an expression about what we're doing in Iraq—an enterprise "by good angels untenanted."

I've had several periods in my life when I could join in a sphere of action, but it's harder now. I could stuff envelopes for a candidate, but it seems more and more important to me that I find a way as a lyric poet to write poems that aren't rhetorical or didactic and yet feel they have a moral underpinning. Yet at the same time, I know the poems I wrote about my mother were partly driven by my torment about not being a good enough daughter—the desire to be good in conflict with the desire to thrive. I still don't know which one won out. I see now how much struggle there was in them. To be compassionate, yet not drown in my own empathy. To be angry, yet also somehow forgiving or letting go. They're more interesting to me now than they were then. Someone once said to me: There are so many *things* in that book. My mother's collectibles were in the same world as popular songs and movies. Sometimes I find the language, the *vocabulary,* of collectibles so delicious, like the language of old song lyrics.

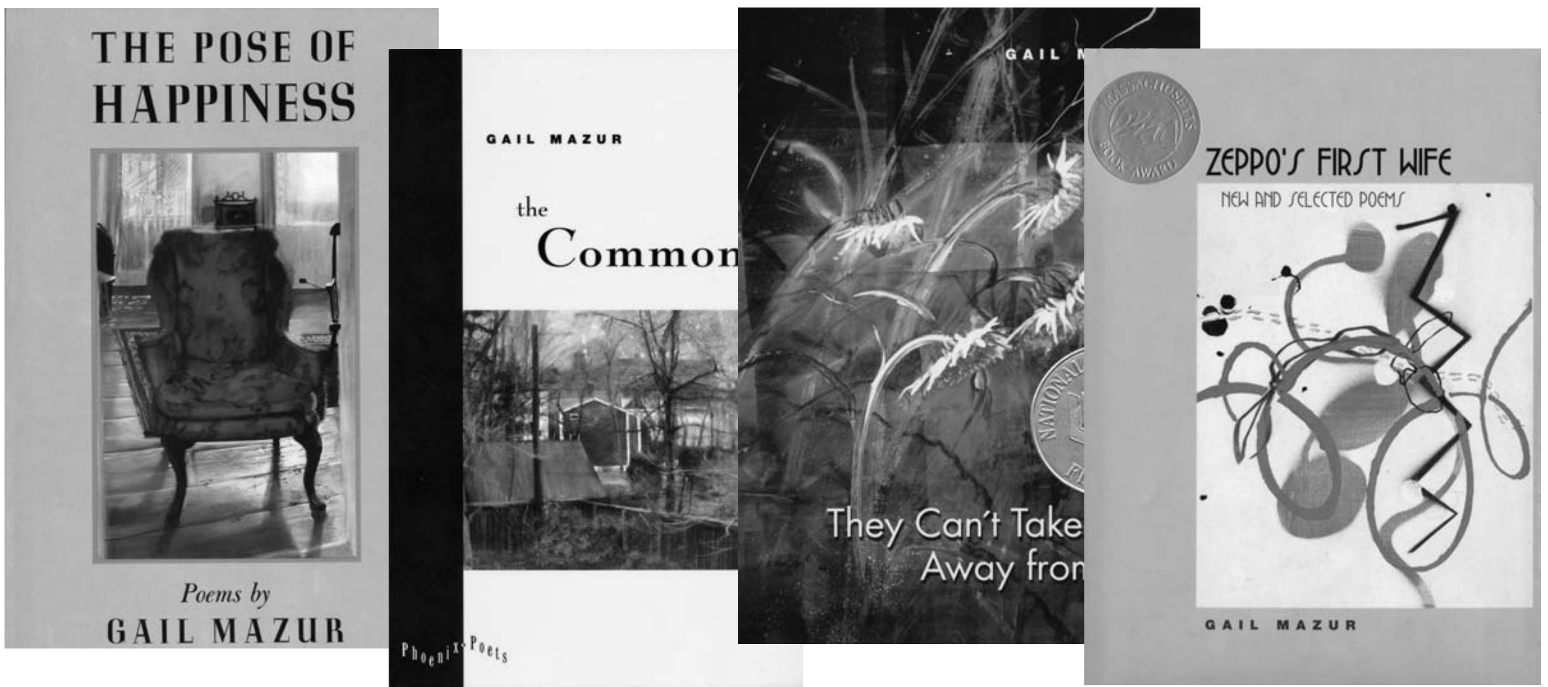
What's been driving your most recent poems?

I think a sense of history and mortality. I feel as if I limit myself. I want to think whenever I'm working on a revision of a poem, I'm sort of pushing the poem. The poem becomes a mysterious system, an organism, a living creature. In a moment you can't explain, the poem begins to pull you by the hand—takes you where you don't dare to go alone. You're not alone, you're *with* the poem, but you don't know what you're doing. The poem knows. Those moments are hard to reconstruct afterwards. How did I do that? Since my first book, I've wanted to push beyond what I know I can say—or think. In revising, you make other intuitive choices that could shock you. They show you what you were thinking that you didn't know you were thinking. Why was this the given for this poem? Where can I take it that's beyond the given? Almost annually, I've written and discarded depressed poems about the end of summer. My "Poem at the End of August" I actually finished in January—I had to remove all the September sadness stuff, the dying leaves, the empty lakes. I still love to have a lot of room for play in a poem. Often the first line that gets me going seems to be very funny.


GAIL MAZUR AND LLOYD SCHWARTZ AT THE MARKET THEATER, 2002, CELEBRATING 29 YEARS OF BLACKSMITH HOUSE READINGS

What about the place of humor in your poems?

It's inseparable from who I am. Sometimes my poems come most perfectly



together if they have both wit and gravitas. Yet sometimes I feel that wit is a tic, or a barrier, that some of it has to be revised out. I have first lines that seem to me very funny, but I don't know if anyone else thinks they are. But that's OK with me. I think "What can I learn from the hummingbird—a big thing like me?" is so funny. In "Bluebonnets," the line about breaking the unwritten law of Texas seems to me really funny. My fantasy about Frank [Bidart] moving to the country is a riot because the idea is so absurd. But the poem doesn't stay wildly funny. "Too late to be a cosmologist or athletic" is funny—two extremes of lost ambitions—but it's about age. I have an affection for that kind of first line. The Zeppo poem is a big poem I move around in a lot. I bet you can't find a poem with more *Z*'s in it, which I find really funny. And it's got Groucho. Alliteration can be beautiful and lyrical, but it can also be funny. I have a phrase I kept wanting to use about Zeppo's first wife—"my putative relative"—which I think is very funny.

How conscious are you of the technical aspects of a poem when you're working on one?

I really feel as if I could spend my whole life working to understand "the line." I'm always aware of the formal decisions. I call Cambridge the city where punctuation takes its last stand. I love the tools of our trade, not just the pencil and keyboard, but all the formal tools. Sometimes I like to work with a kind of invisible syllabics. To feel that revision is the real process of your work is to think about technical issues a lot. Computers have facilitated the number of decisions you can make—infinite possibilities. I still write drafts on a legal pad. When you worked with a typewriter, you were aware of countless decisions, but with a computer there are so many more. Typing was harder—you did more revisions by hand. Your thought process is more visible when you look at those drafts. Changes. Erasures. Crossed-out notes. All your thinking was there on the page—none of it got erased.

But you don't want to go back to that.

No, but it's very interesting to look at people's drafts when that kind of information's there. When I'm teaching I like to bring in multiple drafts—like Bishop's "One Art." Even before she put the poem into shape, you can see her thinking about writing a villanelle. The tiny changes near the end that made the poem perfect. That's exciting to teach.

How does teaching itself connect to your writing?

A lot of the time during the semester, it seems as if it's using me up. But it keeps me in the world. I keep learning new things from my students—things I find hard to believe! I love knowing that I found my vocation in writing and that gave me something to give to students. I love the process of teaching, though I don't know what it does for my writing. I don't usually begrudge the time and intensity it takes away from writing. Because there's so much time I'm not working on a poem. I like reading them new poetry, not to just teach the same things over and over again. It's very bracing—maybe that lift is what it does for my work.

Most poets return to the same theme or image. It's part of their identity. But merely repeating oneself is also a danger. How do you keep yourself, your poems, fresh?

When I was writing what I think of as "all those poems about my mother," the challenge for each poem my mother enters is to do something different, formally, in terms of imagery, in terms of the direction the poem travels. If that was my subject. Or grief, which has been an undercurrent, a theme. I felt almost dogged by the subject—how to vary, like 100 Ways of Looking at Grief. To make sure that bathos wasn't my mode.

What can you do to prevent bathos from taking over?

That's probably where my appetite for detail is an advantage. But also to change the pace, to change the tone, to be hard, in a way. If grief is your subject, be tough. Pull the rug out from under the poem. To include the world. To have good poet friends who'll call me on it. When you're being bathetic, sometimes you really think it's quite moving. You have to have your cliché comb at the ready. To comb out the cliché or subvert it.

Where do you want your poems to go, and do you have any control over it?

I know when you finish a book you have a really urgent desire to have your next poems be different. To leave behind whatever it is you've been doing. For some people it's an incredible trigger. For me, it's almost been paralyzing. I almost forbid myself to worry that any more. I would hope that there would be more of the world, more history, more courage, in them. That I could keep having a bigger view, although I realize the first person will probably be the person with the view in the poem. Really, I just want them to go different places. I want to surprise myself.

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