

## Poetry Transcript

[Opening Music]

Susan Neville: Hello, and welcome to Naptown. I'm your host, Susan Neville, and our guest for this initial series of interviews is writer Dan Wakefield. Mr. Wakefield is the author of nine non-fiction books, two memoirs, five novels, including the best-selling *Going All the Way*.

Bill Moyers called Dan's memoir, *Returning, A Spiritual Journey*, "One of the most important memoirs of the spirit I've ever read." In his book *Island in the City: The World of Spanish Harlem*, James Baldwin wrote, "Dan Wakefield is a remarkable combination of humility and tough mindedness, it makes these streets and these struggling people come alive."

Over the next few episodes, we'll be talking to Mr. Wakefield about his life, including his deep friendships with writers such as Baldwin, Anne Sexton, Joan Didion, and Kurt Vonnegut, and his interviews as a staff writer for the Nation, the Atlantic Monthly, the New York Times, and other newspapers and magazines, with such luminaries as Bobby Kennedy, C. Wright Mills, Dorothy Day, Adam Clayton Powell, Joan Baez, and Golda Meir, some of whom became good friends.

Again, I'm your host, Susan Neville, welcome Mr. Wakefield back to Naptown.

[Transitional Music]

Susan Neville: We're back again taping on Dan Wakefield's front porch during the pandemic.

Dan Wakefield: *How Poetry Saved Me*

I feel as if my initiation into real life and trying to understand and deal with life was through poetry. In high school, Carl Sandburg was a big force for me. I went to Shortridge High School in the great days, a decade after Vonnegut. A great teacher known as "Abie"— Roy V. Aberson— was an assistant coach in every sport. And in the history class he taught, he played a record of Carl Sandburg's, "The People, Yes." And I went out and bought a book of Sandburg's "Complete Poems".

One of those helped ease me through a plan that was already forming. The idea of leaving home and going to some other city, some other place. It was called "The Red Son." And the lines about leaving home were in the voice of this son addressing his friends and relatives: "There is no pity of it and no blame. After all, it is only this: you for the little hills then I go away."

For me, it said, I'm not leaving because I don't love you guys and these places, but I want to know more, do more, experience more. I want to see what's out there. I think one reason I was so open to poetry is that I never tried to be a poet, at least only once in high school. Let it be recorded that I wrote a poem solely for the purpose of trying to impress Cynny Pittenger, who is in love with Bobby Robinson (they are married and have battalions of children and grandchildren) because Bobby was at Dartmouth and he was a damn good poet.

My poem was about a train— the Monon was in my backyard and shook the overhead lamp in our bedroom when it hooted past— but my effort at rhyming didn't do the job. It didn't beat Bobby. With a kind of relief, I said, "I'm not a poet, I don't want to be one, won't try to be one" and that let me enjoy poetry without being burdened by competition. I could read it and relax.

At Columbia College in New York City, I had a poetry course with Mark Van Doren, a Pulitzer Prize poet and an Illinois Midwesterner whose accent made me feel at home in the overwhelming city. I took a course with Lionel Trilling, the great literary critic, course called "Wordsworth, Keats, and Yeats." I can still recite "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" and "The Second Coming" and lots of other lines from Yeats, "The Crazy Jane" poems ("Wrap that foul body up in as foul a rag. I carry the sun in a golden cup, the moon in a silver bag") and "Prayer for My Daughter" ("May she live like some green laurel rooted in one dear perpetual place") and a line from "Among School Children" that comes to me often now and helps me contend with this era of age: "Why should not old men be mad?"

I've been fearful of taking Trilling's class because of his reputation and image of the classic intellectual scholar. He cultivated a slightly English accent and dressed like an Oxford don, though his writing was not at all like that. I delighted in the rule he set the first day of class: "While you are taking this class in Wordsworth, Keats, and Yeats," he said, "I do not want any of you to read any literary criticism of Wordsworth, Keats and Yeats."

One of the collegian intellectual presenters (they often wore vests) asked with dismay, "What then shall we read, Professor Trilling? I treasure Trilling's answer. "We shall read every poem," he said, "written by Wordsworth, Keats, and Yeats." I wanted to cheer. Trilling explained further that "We will not read these poems once, but 10 or 12 or twenty times, until we begin to discern their meaning." I learned to read poetry in that class.

Before going on, I realize I need to go back. I grew up in a time when poetry was a common language. In the first grade class of Miss Roxie Lingle Day at School Eighty in Indianapolis (this was September 1938), we had a poetry contest. It was won by Susan Fox who recited Sandburg's "Fog" famous as the shortest poem anyone knew. I recited a ditty that began "Poor Old Jonathan Bing, he got in his carriage to visit the king." Brevity won.

At Camp Chank tun-un-gi, we kidded around reciting forms and reading the corny ones in the "Boy Scout Manual of 1942". My great friends Jack Hickman and Dicky Warne and I would recite back and forth in mocking pseudo-serious tones a poem in the Scout Manual by Edgar A. Guest (almost as famous as Joyce Kilmer, the author of "Trees", which for some unknown reason everybody was supposed to learn in those days). The cornball Guest poem— I think it was called "The Comer"— began, "He may now be an office boy, a messenger, or a clerk. The smallest paid in the employ of him who gives him work". At that we would crack up laughing. And David Lewis could recite a doozy that began, "Oh the heroes were plenty and well known to fame, in the troops that were led by the czar, and the bravest of these was a man by the name of Ivan Skavinsky Skavar".

David would pantomime elegant sword play as he recited that one. I became a sportswriter for the Shortridge Daily Echo, the first high school daily paper in the country and I wrote a Thursday column called "Sportlite" in friendly competition with Dick Lugar's Tuesday column, "Shooting the Works". I started reading the great sportswriters in the past, the giants of "the Golden Age of Sports" in the 1920s (it wasn't all flappers, it was also fullbacks). The greatest of all was Grantland Rice, who wrote the most poetic lead to ever begin an account of a football game: "Outlined against the blue-grey October sky, the Four Horsemen rode again. In dramatic lore they are known as Famine, Pestilence, Destruction, and Death. These are only aliases. Their real names are Stuhlderer, Miller, Crowley, and Layden." That was the legendary Notre Dame backfield that beat Army 6-0 to be named the national champions in 1924 and began a tradition that

lifted a little college in South Bend, Indiana, to a prominence that never would fade.

I bought a 78rpm record of Knute Rockne, the Notre Dame coach, giving a pep talk to his team. It sounded like a man who had gone stark raving mad— and made my whole body tingle. No other orator had that effect on me 'till Winston Churchill came along with his free world fight poem: "We shall fight them on the land and on the sea, we shall fight them in the villages and in the towns, and we shall never surrender." Before jumping to Churchill, though, I should note that Grantland Rice's poetic flair did not end with his coverage of the epic Army-Notre Dame game. He covered all sports and sometimes he was moved to break into verse, as he did on the death of the great jockey Earl Sande: "Never we'll see him ridin', never his likes again, never a handy guy like Sande, bootin' them babies in."

After Columbia I moved to Greenwich Village, a hotbed of poetry. Maxwell Bodenheim, a poet of past note who had gone to sea, went from booth to booth at the San Remo peddling his poems for nickels and pennies. He never starved. I learned that writers hung out at the White Horse Tavern. Painters could be found at the Cedar Bar, and seldom the twain did meet. The White Horse became the hot spot for writers when the great Welsh poet Dylan Thomas had his last of innumerable drinks before passing out, being taken across the street to Saint Vincent's hospital, and "dying of alcoholism," as it was reported, at age 39. Like countless others I bought his records which were said to sell more than his books because of the power of his voice, which made other poets of the time really mad.

I can still hear his voice not only in my mind, but I still have the records. And I'll never forget his most famous poem— one that is especially appropriate for me now at age 87: "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night." I knew people who had that poem scotched-taped to the wall of their kitchen, or bedroom, or study.

At the big round table in the back room of the White Horse, Michael Harrington, author of "The Other America," that inspired LBJ's poverty program, led a never-ending conversation for 10 years about politics, literature, history, and anything else that started conversation. It was there that I first heard about Federica Garcia Lorca, the great Spanish poet whose "Poet in New York" was in a popular paperback edition with English on one side of a page (translation by Ben Belitt) and Spanish on the other. I carried that book with me like a priest with the catechism everywhere I went for a couple of years.

I quoted from the poem "Dawn" at the head of a chapter in my first book, "Island in the City: The World of Spanish Harlem: "The first on the streets know the truth in their bones, for these, neither Eden, nor passions unleafing, they go to the slough of the ciphers and strictures, to the games without genius and the sweat without profit."

Poetry was in the air in those days, just as jazz was. Mailer said jazz was "the background music" of New York in the fifties; poetry was the liturgy. It was not only in the Village but uptown at the YMHA on Lexington Avenue, and even on Broadway. One of my favorite Broadway experiences, right up there with "South Pacific" was the great Irish actress Siobhan McKenna standing alone on a bare stage and reading the poetry of William Butler Yeats: "All changed, changed utterly; a terribly beauty is born."

I also had the Caedmon record of McKenna reading the Molly Bloom soliloquy and although I had taken a course from Trilling on "Ulysses", I knew I had not understood Joyce's novel until I heard McKenna read the Molly Bloom soliloquy: "I was a flower of the mountain, yes, when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red, yes." Holy, holy, holy.

In a series of amazingly lucky strikes I was writing for "The Nation" at the time. And their good publisher, George Kirstein, nominated me for a Fellowship to the "Bread Loaf Writers Conference" in Middlebury, Vermont. The first of its kind, it spawned countless limitations, and still carries on today. First, as a Fellow and then when I served on the conference staff every even-numbered year of the coming decade (1960-1970), I met and heard many of the poets whose work I would come to know and love.

When I first went as a Fellow in 1959, the poet May Swenson was also a Fellow, and she became an important mentor and friend when we returned to New York. Some of May's poems lit my life, helped me to see beyond the dungeon I had entered of Freudian psychoanalysis. One of those blessed poems was appropriately titled "The Key to Everything?"— Is there anything I can do or has everything been done? You're waiting for the right person, the doctor, or the nurse; the father or the mother or the person with the name you keep mumbling in your sleep." Another of her poems I treasure is "Mortal Surge: —"We are eager, we pant, we whine like whips cutting the air, the frothing sea, the fiery furnace, the jeweled eyes of animals look call to us." Beyond the gift of her poems, May Swenson believed in me as a writer; she wrote her belief on the title page of one

of her books she gave me, predicting that the novel I had been told I couldn't write by the publisher of my first book would be written and published and it was. May Swenson's belief, written and signed, meant everything to me and kept the dream alive.

Those two weeks at Bread Loaf as a Fellow was a condensed lifetime and a graduate poetry course. The Writers Conference was the brainchild of Robert Frost, who lived nearby in Ripton, Vermont, and suggested to Middlebury College that the cabins and dining room in the mountains be put to use when the Middlebury Summer Language Programs ended in mid-August. Fittingly enough, Frost himself came for a reading when I was a Fellow. Snowy-haired, curmudgeonly, he ate vanilla ice cream during the cocktail hour at the staff cottage and showed his mean streak when he focused on a middle-aged poet who he heard had become a Catholic in the past year: "I hear you've given up," he told her. But all was forgiven to the poet who wrote such American classics as "The Road Not Taken," "Mending Wall," "After Apple-Picking," and "Directive," whose last line is embedded in my mind: "Weep for what little things could make them glad."

The Pulitzer prize poet Richard Wilbur was on the staff. I got to hear him read some of his great poems—"Love Calls Us To The Things of This World", and he gave one of the best talks on writing I have ever heard — not just about poetry but about any words written to tell a story of fact or fiction, oration, or prayer. Wilbur told how the family of a dying woman was gathered around her deathbed, not knowing what to do. And she raised up from her pillow and said, "Throw away my books; throw away my clothes; throw away the stones of the house; throw me away— and fix breakfast". Wilbur's point was that she didn't say anything fancy or flowery— nothing like "Ye the living must be courageous and carry on with the great challenge of life," or "Kindle the flame of your forefathers as you face the future". No. How far more powerful it was to be simple and specific, enabling people to move and act: "Fix breakfast".

I was inspired by Wilbur's talk and his own poetry, "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World," and the line from that poem refreshed and enlivened me. "Let there be clean linen for the backs of thieves, let lovers go fresh and sweet and be undone. And the heaviest nuns walk in a pure floating, of dark habits, keeping their difficult balance."

When I got home to the Village from Bread Loaf, I saw what Wilbur was giving a reading at NYU the following week and I eagerly went to hear him. I also read that on the same night, Jack Kerouac was giving a reading at the Village Vanguard, a jazz club where the great trombone player, J.J. Johnson and his group, were playing. J.J. got his start on Indiana Avenue. I introduced myself and we talked about Shortridge and [inaudible]. I went to the Wilbur reading first and then to the Vanguard. Wilbur was as inspiring as he had been at Bread Loaf. Jack was drunk, spilling papers, and slurring words. At a break, Kerouac said to J.J. Johnson, "I'd like to play the trombone myself. And J.J. said, "You look more like a trumpet man to me." I reported on the two events in a review in *The Nation*, concluding that "It was Richard Wilbur who was 'on the road,' who had been all along."

A few weeks later George Kirstein told me that Kenneth Rexroth, the San Francisco poet and promoter of all things "Beat", had come to his office and complained about my review. "He asked me if Wakefield was some old "Time-Life" guy, and I told him "No, he's twenty-something, and he lives in the Village." Rexroth, for the record, was the premier promoter of the new fad of poetry read to jazz. He called it "Jazzetry." My writer friend, Ivan Gold, quipped, "Why not, Poazz"?

I was invited back to Bread Loaf to give a talk the next year and met a Fellow who I heard had a groundbreaking book of poems coming. She was lounging in an armchair, puffing with vigorous intensity on a cigarette, and swinging a leg as if anxious to get up and go somewhere. I introduced myself and told her I'd heard good things about her new book —her first —and she gave a raucous laugh and said, "What do you think of the title 'To Bedlam and Part Way Back?' Pretty good, huh? You think it'll go over?" I said I didn't really know but that was before I heard her read.

That fall I went to a poetry reading at the YMHA in New York, featuring three young poets. I only knew one, George Starbuck, an editor at Houghton Mifflin, a bright, personable fellow whose poetry I enjoyed. When I saw that this "Bedlam" person from Bread Loaf was on the program —her name was Anne Sexton— I winced, bracing myself for what was to come. Some jokey poems delivered with a raucous laugh? When she came to the podium, she seemed transformed. Her body became straight and still. Her voice a compelling contralto that cast a spell. She read "Double Image," a poem about her daughter, her mother, and herself; an intergenerational connection of three women.



I knew I was listening to a voice that would be heard, words I would come to know and treasure. That kind of thing happened in New York in those days; you could walk into a place, a seemingly ordinary place, and walk out transformed, blessed. That's what I felt after hearing Anne Sexton read her poem. Her line has rung in my head with a depth of solace since I first heard it comes from her poem "Kind Sir, These Woods" (dedicated to Thoreau) that tells about a childhood game of closing your eyes and turning around in the woods and feeling you were lost, until you opened your eyes and found it was "only myself", caught between the grapes and the thorns."

One of her many poems that stuck in my mind —not only as poem, but a whole writing course— was "You, Doctor Martin." It was in her first book. It came from her experience of spending time at McLean's, the famous mental hospital in Boston where other poets and writers— Robert Lowell, most notably— had stayed in times of inner trouble. The poem was about the psychiatrist who Anne and other patients had saw in his work every day, after he first had breakfast in the hospital dining room. The opening line of the poem is "You, Doctor Martin, walk from breakfast to madness." That line hits like a blow, like a wakeup call, telling a whole story in the simplest way imaginable— no words of more than two syllables, no more punctuation than two commas and a period. It was a lesson in the school of "plain is beautiful." It is the poetry version of the prose of Thoreau and Orwell. It reminded me of the lesson the poet Richard Wilbur taught in his talk at Bread Loaf when he told of the dying woman who commanded her family to fix breakfast.

Conference in 1966, I met another poet, Maxine Kumin, who became a great friend for life. Max lived in Newton, a Boston suburb, and I had moved from New York to Boston when I was a Neiman Fellow in Journalism for a year at Harvard in 1963-64. I didn't like Harvard or Cambridge, but I went to visit an editor friend on Beacon Hill and when I saw the neighborhood, I knew it was home (except for a few side trips to Hollywood, I lived there for forty years.).

Maxine Kumin was a wonderful poet and her best friend was Anne Sexton. Max got me together with Anne for drinks and dinners and the three of us became buddies. Max had met Anne and George Starbuck in a poetry class at the Boston Center for Adult Education, an old mansion on Commonwealth Avenue where I later was to take workshops and offer one of my own. That Boston Center was not only a beautiful old building but a powerful sort of energy center for the creative life of the city.



Max and Anne worked so closely together they had a dedicated telephone line (this was long before any internet or cell phone) so they could edit their poems together from each of their homes. One spring semester when Max won a traveling fellowship, she asked me to teach her writing course at the Newton College of the Sacred Heart and a few years later she taught my graduate writing class at Boston University when I had to be in L.A.

I introduced Anne to Kurt Vonnegut at a party at my house on Revere Street on the hill, and they immediately began talking about Cinderella. Anne was writing a book of poems based on Grimm's fairy tales, and Kurt borrowed a pencil and piece of paper from me and he drew her his diagram of the plot of Cinderella, which he often used in a talk on the plots of stories (it is shown in his book "A Man without a Country" in his essay "Here is a Lesson in Creative Writing.") Anne was so taken with Kurt's analysis of Cinderella that she asked him to write a foreword to her book of poems based on Grimm's tales, "Transformations." As Vonnegut so often did in his work, he articulated what had only been feelings I had about Anne's poetry.

This is what Vonnegut wrote in his foreword to her book, "Transformations": "I asked a poet friend one time what it was that poets did, and he thought a while, and then he said, 'They extend the language'. I thought that was neat, but it didn't make me grateful in my bones for poets. Language extenders I can take or leave alone. Anne Sexton does a deeper favor for me: she domesticates my terror, examines it and describes it, teaches it some tricks which will amuse me, then lets it gallop wild in my forest once more. She does that for herself, too, I assume. Good for her".

I can think of no more precise explanation of what Anne Sexton's poems do for me, and for so many readers when, for instance, she writes in the poem "Her Kind": "I have ridden in your cart, driver. Waved my nude arms at villages going by, learning the last bright routes, survivor; where your flames still bite my thigh and my ribs crack where your wheels wind."

On May 7, 1973, I got a call from Max to come at once to her house in Newton to celebrate with her and Anne; they were already into the first bottle of champagne but there were plenty more. Maxine had won the Pulitzer for her latest book of poetry "Up Country." (Anne won hers in 1967 for "Live or Die"). Anne asked me to introduce her at a reading she was giving at Radcliffe.

We first had dinner and Anne was very nervous, worried that the reading was in too large a hall and not enough people would show up. As we approached the huge old gothic hunk of Harvard's Memorial Hall where the reading was scheduled, we saw five or six people standing outside. Anne moaned, "Look, there's only a handful of people. That hall is so big, this will be a disaster." When we finally got into the hall, it was packed to the ceiling. Standing room only.

As always, Anne's presence at the podium transformed her, calming her nerves to a stately and sober stance, in command of the scene. She delivered one of the best, most moving poetry readings I had heard. She was a favorite on college campuses and enhanced the appeal of her performance by forming a rock group "Anne Sexton and Her Kind." Of course, there were some poets and lit crits who sniffed, and condescended, and condemned her popularity as well as her breaking of polite, poetic boundaries. Maxine Kumin explained: "She wrote openly about menstruation, abortion, masturbation, incest, adultery, and drug addiction at a time when the proprieties embraced none of these as proper topics for poetry." Anne proudly showed me a gold emblem she wore on a chain around her neck— it was in Latin and she translated, "Don't Let the Bastards Get You."

In the autumn of the year that followed the happy celebration of Max's Pulitzer, Anne completed work on her new book of poems, "The Awful Rowing Toward God," and could wait no longer to arrive at her death. Some critics who like to attribute creativity to neurosis or mental illness, claimed that writing poetry was a factor in her suicide. Such a twisted concept could not be farther from the truth. I heard Anne Sexton say more than once "It's the poetry that keeps me alive." God bless her mighty soul.

After Anne's death I did not again find a new poet whose work I loved and championed for many years. I assumed I never would, but life eventually erases all assumptions, good and bad. Of course, I always kept up with Max's work and appreciated it as I always did, but it seemed as if "My Life in Poetry" ended with "The Awful Rowing Toward God".

Around the time I got to know Anne and Maxine, in the late sixties, my emotional attention was grabbed by the new music. I remember a moment when I first "got it" about the Beatles. At first, I had dismissed them as "kid stuff" from England, long-haired hippies, blah, blah, blah, but I can see and hear again one moment in a Boston apartment when I stopped whatever I was doing and listened, enthralled by "Norwegian Wood." Oh My God. This is something new. I used to lie on the

grass in The Boston Public Garden and look up through the bright green foliage and hear in my head "Here Comes the Sun."

I was a guest teacher at the University of Illinois Journalism School in the spring semester of 1968 living in a depressing apartment in a cinder block building called the Hoover Chiropractic Clinic, across from the Red Wheel Diner (the wheel blinked on and off all night like a prop in a bad noir movie.) While driving back to my grim apartment, the gloom was suddenly lifted by a voice on the radio. It was so distinctive and so uplifting I pulled over to the side of the road to hear the rest of "Different Drum," performed by Linda Ronstadt and The Stone Poney. It was like discovering a new poet.

Two years later I got my dream assignment to interview Linda Ronstadt after one of her performances at the Golden Bear in Redondo Beach, California (That made up for the semester across from the Red Wheel Diner). Can anyone forget the first time they heard Janis Joplin sing "Me and Bobby McGee? Or Joni Mitchell singing "Clouds," or Judy Collins' "Who Knows Where the Times Goes?" It wasn't the words that mattered so much, it was the music, the voices, the sound.

I remember taking Max to my apartment to make her listen to Collins singing "Who Knows Where the Time Goes?" and she stood there listening. And then, when it was over she said, just looking at the wall above the recording player, pronouncing these words as if reading a line from a very dull student paper: "Who knows where the time goes?" I was embarrassed. I had thought it was some wonderful new poetry. The words were mundane. The poetry was in the voice. The voices made any words sound profound, and witty, and sad, and happy, and wonderful. And those were the last to do that for me in pop music. At some point before the turn of the century it became fashionable for pop singers not to pronounce the words— it was fashionable and became the only way to sing, to mush the words. Recently a dear friend had me listen to a song by the hot new star Billie Eilish. I lost it. I yelled at my friend, "Why can't she pronounce the damn words?" I demanded with angry, old-guy ardor. "Chet Baker may have been zonked out of his mind on heroin when he whisper-spoke his songs, but by God you could year every word, like this: "Is your figure less than Green"?"

Is your mouth a little weak? When you open it to speak? Are you smart? Can anyone imagine in wildest dream or nightmare not being able to discern every syllable of a song sung by Frank Sinatra? Or Billie Holiday? Of any one of the Mamas and the Papas or the Beach Boys, alone or together? Of any great pop

singer for the mush-mouth era? So, as far as poetry and music goes, I assumed I would never be knocked out again or stood on my head by hearing a new song or poem, but that was all right, I had stored up enough of both to live on, in memory and books and DVDs. I should know by now, after 87 years, that whenever you make such assumptions (assuming you have any clue about life whatsoever) they are sure to be broken.

The first poem I have heard— I mean really heard since Anne Sexton— that got me in the gut, in the head, and in the heart was at the last place I would have expected to hear it. It happened in 2016 at what was billed as a "Resist Poetry" reading on the south side of Indianapolis. You could not fail to miss one syllable of this poet reading her poem. She has been described as performing her poem.

She doesn't dance around or throw up her arms or use a hula-hoop or any kind of prop. She simply speaks with utter clarity and conviction so that you cannot miss one syllable of her poem. Her name is Tasha Jones. Her poem describes an arc in the history of the world, and in particular the history of this country: "From Pyramids to Plantations to Projects to Penitentiaries".

The poet at IUPUI Professor Karen Kovacik, who had organized the event as part of the Pan America's National Program later wrote of Tash's poem: "For all who believe we are living in a post-racial society, Tasha Jones' poem is embracing corrective. Tasha's poem challenges us to live in the truth." Miss Jones not only gives us the arc of this shocking history, she personalizes it in images and phrases that are as vivid as they are valid. Most remarkably, she makes beauty out of horror and evokes, for me as a Christian, the sorrow and compassion of the Jesus of the Gospels: "Follow me to the good book where people are metaphors for trees and peace is found in the stillness of streams. Follow me to the good book where the end is known in the beginning and the beginning is known in the end."

Life, of course, has unwelcomed surprises: pandemics. Poems and music help us get through. I think often of a line from the title poem of Maxine's book "Our Ground Time Here Will be Brief: "We gather speed for the last run and lift off into the weather." My run has been longer than I ever expected. I don't know how I got this far (and ended up where I started) but I could never have made it without the poets, and singers, and jazz musicians, and writers of all kinds. I love them because they got me here. They are still with me. They still feed me. Bless them all.

Susan Neville: Thank you. Thank you. So, beautiful. There are so many lines in that piece that I just love that right at the beginning when you say that jazz was the background music of New York in the fifties and poetry was its liturgy—

Dan Wakefield: Yeah.

Susan Neville: Was a great way of explaining what that is to you and that the line where you say something about that words fact or fiction, oration, or prayer.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah.

Susan Neville: And I noticed in what you read yesterday from returning and just, you know, looking at your own work even line by line, it occurs to me that part of what you got from poets has a lot to do with the musicality of your own language, not show off musicality, but the kind of rhythmic moments in your sentences that, you know, in here even when you read other people's poetry.

Dan Wakefield: I forgot that “The Returning” was a good book.

Susan Neville: Yeah, it really is.

Dan Wakefield: But I tell you. [Inaudible] Keats, it's not, I mean it's sloppy. And really, confused the editor.

Susan Neville: Like, maybe talk about editors from the second. I have a couple questions just about that piece, which is, I just want to say is extraordinary for a number of reasons. Those are all great stories, wonderful poetry. You have the opportunity to meet so many incredible people from the 20th century. And also, I think it's incredible because you just put that piece together a couple of weeks ago. And to all my, you know, 18 to 22-year-old students who think that, you know, you're done with your best work by the time you're thirty or, I just, I think that's an incredible essay.

So, I also, I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about Maxine Kumin and Sexton's friendship or, you know, the difference between their poetry. I mean, Vonnegut said that Anne kind of domesticated his terror. What would you say that Maxine's poetry did for you?

Dan Wakefield: I would say it saw- it understood your daily life. I read one of her poems. I was asked to read at a wedding of one of my students. And it was a poem, it was like [inaudible], birthday, it was about marriage. She had a very long marriage. And the early on got a house. They bought an old farm in New Hampshire, which a lot of smart people in Boston did. And I used to go up there. My God. That's the one place where I did cross-country skiing,

Susan Neville: Ah.

Dan Wakefield: Which I probably couldn't get two yards on that.

Susan Neville: She was very athletic, wasn't she? I mean, I think of her as being a horsewoman.

Dan Wakefield: She was a great swimmer. And also, I used to think I was a pretty good Scrabble player. And in New York, in the old days I used to go to Ted's apartment on Sunday night, we would have these all night Scrabble games. And sent out for Chinese food. And I was really good at those. And then, I played Scrabble with Maxine. I could hardly get off the board. I mean, she and her son and husband are just— they were on some other level.

Susan Neville: That's funny. I somehow can't imagine Maxine and Anne Sexton being good friends.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah, they were, they were the best. Can you imagine having their own telephone line?

Susan Neville: No, I can't. So, you know, Maxine would just pick up the phone?

Dan Wakefield: Yeah.

Susan Neville: And it would ring at Anne's house?

Dan Wakefield: And vice versa. They read over every line.

Susan Neville: Oh, that's great.

Dan Wakefield: You must have an image of Maxine as being very straight.

Susan Neville: I think I do. Maybe that's why I'm asking. I mean, you know, we all have an image of Anne Sexton. I've seen videos of her readings.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah.

Susan Neville: And whenever I can't say that I've ever seen a video of Maxine Kumin or even sought one out. So, mostly I just have kind of, you know, photographs in my head. But, I mean, she was poet.

Dan Wakefield: She had her wild side.

Susan Neville: She did?

Dan Wakefield: Yeah.

Susan Neville: You don't need to go into it unless you want to. This is kind of a Granfalloonie thing to do. You know, the part in "Cat's Cradle" where the characters are saying, "He's a Hoosier, he's a Hoosier, too". And I was just thinking. It occurred to me that you read Ulysses and studied it in college fairly early.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah.

Susan Neville: And that the person who published Ulysses in the United States was Margaret Anderson and "The Little Review" and that she was from Indianapolis. J.J. Johnson, of course, the trombonist you mentioned is from Indianapolis and Kenneth Rexroth was from the region.

Dan Wakefield: Really?

Susan Neville: Yeah, he was. He wrote kind of, you know, an interesting autobiography about growing up, you know, around Crown Point, South Bend. So, you know, everyone's a Hoosier.

Dan Wakefield: Karen?

Susan Neville: Yeah, Karen [Inaudible], yeah.

Dan Wakefield: From the region?



Susan Neville: Yeah. So, that was my little Granfalloon thing to do. Let's see. I didn't know Anne Sexton had a band.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah.

Susan Neville: That's just really great.

Dan Wakefield: And, you know, she had that poem, "Her Kind", so.

Susan Neville: Right. I've heard that.

Dan Wakefield: Anne Sexton and Her Kind

Susan Neville: Did she sing?

Dan Wakefield: No. She read the poem.

Susan Neville: She read the poem so [inaudible] it was kind of like Rexroth's jazzatry or something.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah, but—

Susan Neville: Different.

Dan Wakefield: I don't think of it in the same way.

Susan Neville: Yeah, yeah. That's really great. I would love to see something about that.

Dan Wakefield: I think they were sort of students or grad students.

Susan Neville: I wondered.

Dan Wakefield: Or musicians. Boy, that reading she gave at Harvard. I wish, I remember the introduction was mercifully short and I used a Vonnegut line. He talked about he was supposed to give a lecture on book or writer, and he said he opened his mouth and nothing came out. And so, I said- It's like, you know, I'm trying to think of how do you describe Anne Sexton's of poetry and I opened my mouth and nothing came out.

Susan Neville: Great. You know, I have a friend who is a poet who saw Anne Sexton read probably a bit later than that, and one of the things he said that bothered him was that she needed to go mad again in order to get the next book of poetry. And I know that you mentioned that, in fact, that was kind of the thing that saved her.

Dan Wakefield: What killed her was the drinking and the psychiatrist, who did never mention it might be a good idea to stop. And, you know, the same with—

Susan Neville: Right.

Dan Wakefield: -Me. Now, I think I might have once after I called him up at 3:00 o'clock in the morning and said I shouldn't drink so much. But in those days, people could do any kind of psychiatry, you know, go in drunk to see their therapists or whatever. But, yeah, listen. She had— just imagine that class at the Boston Center, there was a guy named John Holmes who taught a poetry class.

Susan Neville: Is that John Clellon Holmes or a different—

Dan Wakefield: Yeah.

Susan Neville: Yeah, I knew John Clellon Holmes.

Dan Wakefield: No, no. I don't think it was.

Susan Neville: He was a friend of Kerouac's.

Dan Wakefield: No, no.

Susan Neville: Different gentlemen?

Dan Wakefield: This was a Boston guy. But she- Anne and Maxine were like housewives in the suburbs. And Starbuck, I don't think he was married yet. An editor, lowly editor [inaudible] and they take this poetry class. And then, they all started meeting at the Ritz and drinking martinis before. But, you know, it's so funny. When I think of Bread Loaf, now, as this great— when it was happening I thought it was just a great place to have a party.

Susan Neville: Yeah, yeah.

Dan Wakefield: And it was infamous for that. And Richard Yeats, a famous saying he had ended up, he was there once and, so, I ended up on the roof this staff cottage. Then I suppose, they had to call the fire department from Middlebury to get him down.

Susan Neville: Had he been drinking?

Dan Wakefield: He was never not drinking.

Susan Neville: He's never not drinking. You know what? I mean, alcohol, is that particular generation of poets, I mean, you mentioned Dylan Thomas earlier, poet, but, you know, dying of alcoholism in his late thirties. That's so tragic.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah. You know, and Fitzgerald, at what, 44 or something.

Susan Neville: Right.

Dan Wakefield: James Agee at 44 or five. And, you know, Pete Hamill wrote a book called "Those Drinking Games" in which he talks about— and I was so glad because I didn't want to be the only one that said we were told that in order to be a serious writer, you have to be a serious drinker. That was just, you know.

Susan Neville: Well, in addition to being told by Hemingway that you needed to get shot at.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah.

Susan Neville: Which, luckily, my generation I don't remember ever hearing that. But drinking, heard that one.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah.

Susan Neville: Yeah, you know, like if you're having trouble with your manuscript, go drink a bottle of wine, you know. By the end of the bottle, yeah, you won't have any problems anymore. Which, I wondered when you mentioned Robert Frost ate ice cream at the party, was he a recovered alcoholic? I don't know this or—

Dan Wakefield: I don't know. He just sort of could do whatever he wanted.

Susan Neville: Yeah.

Dan Wakefield: He just wasn't interested. And did you ever hear of a poet named Leonie Adams?

Susan Neville: No.

Dan Wakefield: She was the poet he said, "You've given up."

Susan Neville: Oh, interesting.

Dan Wakefield: I really didn't lie to you because I sort of had a crush on her. She was older but like a very lovely, older woman sort of [inaudible].

Susan Neville: The class but Maxine and Anne were in? That's not the same class. Were they in a class with Robert Lowell and—

Dan Wakefield: No. That was McLean's.

Susan Neville: That was at McLean's?

Dan Wakefield: Max was never-

Susan Neville: Right. I've always been fascinated by who isn't by McLean's because there's so many jazz musicians who were also there and James Taylor.

Dan Wakefield: And, you know, in Florida, my best friends in my condo were Frank and Marion Del Vecchio. Marion wrote a wonderful memoir, I thought, that whatchamacallit, the bookstore guy in Miami?

Susan Neville: Mitch Kaplan?

Dan Wakefield: Yeah, he didn't publish. I thought he was crazy. It was, she had an amazing life and she'd been at McLean's and was in a musical comedy there that somebody had staged. Some guy in Miami who had been in there, but—

Susan Neville: I think that was partly why, maybe, particularly women who came along after those, you know, the generations of comics had to kind of pass through McLean's, in one way or another, got the idea not that you had to drink or be shot at but that you had to be crazy in order to write poetry.

[ Music ]

Susan Neville: Thanks, again, to Mister Wakefield and thank you to our listeners for listening. Naptown is taped at Butler University's Irwin Library, with the help of Megan Rutledge-Grady. Funding for Naptown was provided by the Aris [phonetic] Fund, National Endowment for Humanities, and Indiana Humanities. This is a Dominique Weldon/Rory Geshmer [phonetic] Production. Again, this is your host, Susan Neville. See you next time in Naptown.

[ Closing Music ]