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Mushroom Picking with Maxine

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In the serendipitous way of things, Maxine Kumin was one of my first mentors. It was the summer of 1970, and I was thirteen. My mother, Joy Anderson, a children's-book writer, was spending part of the summer, as she had for the previous several years, at the Breadloaf Writers' Conference, in Vermont. At her suggestion, I had joined her for a week.

I was new to the United States. We had been living abroad, mostly in Asia, from the time that I was a toddler until just the year before. I was not enjoying it much in the U.S. At the school I'd attended the previous year, in a Virginian suburb of Washington, D.C., some of the other children had derisively labelled me the "White Chink" because of my formal mannerisms and general cluelessness. It had begun when some boys learned that I had never heard of terms like "cocksucker" or "dickhead." I did a lot of fighting. The summer vacation was a welcome respite from an America that, for me, was a bewildering and hostile environment. My mother had encouraged me to write ever since I was young, and I had done so, preciously, writing gauche poetry in my free moments.

Maxine Kumin was a member of the Breadloaf staff. My mother thought very highly of her and admired her poetry greatly, and had become friendly with her. They were the same age, but I had the sense that to my mother, Maxine Kumin was wiser and more mature than herself. She introduced me to her, and I felt in awe of her, too. My mother gave me some of Maxine Kumin's poems to read. They were contemplations about nature, and I felt that I understood them. I liked the simple, evocative purity of her descriptions—and the rhythm of her language had a soothing permanence.

One day, the three of us went to pick wild mushrooms together in the forest. For several hours we roved, filling baskets with the treasures we found. I was not that interested in mushrooms but was entranced by the natural world. Hoping that we might spot a deer, or a bear, or a wolverine, I kept up a vigilant watch on the treelines and the edges of meadows. None of us spoke very much; it was all a meditative silence, and, except for our feet crunching leaves and snapping twigs, it felt to me like a state of rapture.

I carried Maxine Kumin's basket for her. Now and then, she spoke, telling me the names of plants and trees she knew. I felt a deep respect for her knowledge of such things, for her quiet wisdom, for her mastery of language. Later, as we walked out of the woods, she told me that she had heard from my mother that I wrote, too, and she asked me what I liked to write about. I cannot remember what I told her: at that point I wrote little besides the odd poem, and kept a sometimes-diary. I do remember telling her that, at the end of summer, I would be going to Africa. With the agreement of my parents, I was going to leave Virginia, which I so disliked. I would spend the coming school year in Liberia. I would live with my mother's brother, Uncle Warren, a geologist, who lived there with my Aunt Doris. I was very excited about my pending adventure. I told Maxine Kumin that I intended to travel widely through the wilds of Africa, and to write about it.

Maxine Kumin asked me if I had a typewriter of my own. I didn't, I confessed. Whenever I could, I told her, I used my mother's, but usually, I wrote by hand. She encouraged me to learn how to type properly, and she recommended that I try and get an Olivetti Lettera 32. It was the best portable typewriter in the world, she said, and it would be perfect for someone like me. I listened carefully, memorizing the name of the machine. I felt deeply excited. It was as if Maxine Kumin had bestowed a sacred secret upon me. I promised her that I would save up my money and do exactly as she advised.

From that day onward, I dreamed of owning the machine she had spoken of. I associated its acquisition with my pending ability, I hoped, of one day writing well, as she did.

As things turned out, I was twenty before I finally bought my Olivetti Letter 32, in a camera and this-and-that shop in lower Manhattan. It was streamlined pale-green metal with black keys and it had its own carrying case that was a matching pale green with a broad black stripe down the middle. It cost me thirty-five dollars, which seemed like a lot of money to me at the time.

As I sat down in front of what, for me, was a device imbued with magical properties, I felt great emotion, and the very first thing I typed out on it was a poem.