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Karen Alkalay-Gut

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Alkalay-Gut:

Plea for a moratorium on poems about Jerusalem.
I could write about Jerusalem forever.
There's not a stone in that city that doesn't breath.
Inspire.
But that's what's so frightening.
People kill for inspiration like that.
People die for poems like that.
Belly Dancing, Tel Aviv, March 2002.
Hakim is singing and I am swinging my cane.
The coins around my hips jingle just in the right places and deepen the beat.
And I ignore for the moment the way the chains on the Merchava tanks going into Kalkilya jingle just like me.
Finally I've got that contraction right.
It's a split second thing you barely notice but takes forever for a klutz like me to learn, especially when I see from the studio window some guy skim down the stairs and I'm not sure whether he's holding dance gear or an M-16.
How easy the other becomes the foe.
The closer he is, the more dangerous.
Pay attention, I tell myself, as my cane slips from the crown of my head, clatters to the floor and the whole class stops the dance to look at me.
Control what you need for balance, let the rest move free.

Rubin:
Welcome to the Rockport Writers Forum, an ongoing series of conversations with literary contemporaries. I'm Stan Rubin.
Our guest today, Karen Alkalay-Gut, was born in London, England and moved to the United States as a small as a young girl. She grew up in Rochester, New York, not far from where we are now. Received her Bachelors, Masters and PhD degrees from the University of Rochester.
Since 1972 she's been living in Israel where she's raised a family, writing poetry and she's been teaching at Tel Aviv University.
Karen Gut is the author of some 20 collections of poetry, as well as biography and essay. Her work has been published in the US, Canada and Israel and as appeared in languages such as Arabic, Yiddish, Spanish, Romanian, Polish, Urdu, and Japanese, among others. She also publishes, writes and publishes, one should say, an online journal, the Tel Aviv Journal, in which she has been documenting the daily life, her life in Israel during the last two years of strife in that country.
Here most recent books include, "The Love of Clothes and Nakedness," "In My Skin" and "Ignorant Armies." And a book, "So far, So Good" is forthcoming.
Karen, it's a great pleasure to have you here.

Alkalay-Gut:
It's a great pleasure to be here.

Rubin:
Okay. I want to start by talking about the two poems, fairly recently, that you read at the beginning of this. The first was a small piece,

striking piece about Jerusalem and poetry. Where does that come from? What's the connection of Jerusalem and poetry?

Alkalay-Gut:
The immediate, the immediate source of that poem was an evening, a literary evening and an artistic evening where people were supposed to bring in poems about Jerusalem. There were poems in Arabic, there were poems in English, there were poems in Hebrew, and I kept thinking that everybody's writing these poems about Jerusalem and everyone's wanting to, you know, talk about how important Jerusalem is to him.
And that doesn't solve any problems to me.
It just creates more problems.
I'd rather Jerusalem not be so significant.
I'd rather, you know, I'd rather talk about the beach.

Rubin:
Okay. The second poem, also, comes clearly -- comes from the context of contemporary events. First stanza has the image of the Merchava tanks going into Kalkilya and it's right out of the news, really, right out of sort of today's or yesterday's news. But running through the poem it starts with this person, this musician, Hakim, and there is this sensuous belly dance going on against the background of war. Would you say something about where this poem, which is subtitled, "Tel Aviv, March 2002." So, it's that recent. Where did that come from? How did that grow?

Alkalay-Gut:
It's recent. It's at the time of -- really, the most frequent terrorist attacks in Tel Aviv were taking place around that time. And everyone was spooked. There was a guard at the, you know, the dance studio that I dance at. Hakim is an Arabic singer, very jazzy, very in, very good. And here we are dancing Arabic dances in Tel Aviv and worried that someone is going to blow us up. That kind of contrast of all the different things was very interesting to me. There's a strange and little known fact that since belly dancing has been problematic for fundamentalists all over the world, it has kind of faded out of Arabic society, at least as far as night clubs and public performances are concerned. And it became very popular in Israel. So, the belly dance center of the world is becoming Israel. Very strange kind of -- one of the many ironies of the Middle East.

Rubin:
There was a feminist belly dancing kind of movement in the United States.

Alkalay-Gut:
It's feminist. I think belly dancing is feminist.

Rubin:
Why?

Alkalay-Gut:
Because it's -- you are learning about things that only women can do and do well. It isn't made for men, it isn't supposed to be for men, it's for women and for women's self-discovery and for women helping other women. So, it isn't even artificial to say it's a feminist dance. It isn't

something that is, you know, made political. It's that way, I think, naturally.

Rubin:
So, let's talk back about composing the poem. You experienced it, so you knew there'd be a poem. So, what happens, you go home and write the poem that night? How does this poem -- how does any poem grow for you and this is an example?

Alkalay-Gut:
Lately, a lot of the poems and this is one example, or not mine, they come as a result of conversations with people and other people expressing feelings. Not just my own, you know, my own expression. There were a lot of things I thought were very private, you know, like I was scared and I thought I was the only one who was scared. But when I talk to friends, I talk to someone else it turns out they were too. And I wrote the poem in a sense for them to show that they weren't' alone, for my whole class of belly dance -- Belly Dancers.

Rubin:
I don't have to ask the obvious, which is, how events in the last year and more have influenced your poetry. Clearly your poetry responds to daily life, that's the nature of your poetry. How would you describe what you do as a poet, what your poetic project is.

Alkalay-Gut:
For years I felt guilty about this and I tried to write poetry that was eternal, that didn't respond to daily life, but went beyond itself, you know. The whole idea of writing a poem and then putting it away for 10 years and then seeing if it's still good. I believed in that theoretically, but my poetry was more response to what was going on around me. and now I've become -- I've kind of caught up with what I write -- what I do and now I agree with what I do. That's what poetry should be, it should be something that changes every minute and it responds to a changing situation. And I hope things change every minute, they don't stay eternal. We are in a different kind of world now where things change and we have to keep our self-open to the change and help that change. So, I think my poetry is -- or what I'm trying to do now in the poetry is reflect that and even encourage that.

Rubin:
What kind of change do you want your poetry to contribute to?

Alkalay-Gut:
Oh, I want to make people more aware of the other. I have a project, for example, at Tel Aviv University where students, Arabic, Hebrew and English write poems. They have to translate each other and we public out, I don't know, maybe 60 poems in a book. The idea is when you have to translate someone, you have to understand them. And the whole idea of poetry I think is that when you read a poem you understand someone else. If you can read the other, you can understand the other. And what that begins a process that I think is very important. I think that poetry is a way for understanding and understanding is the first thing we need to do. And I think the people want to understand each other.

Rubin:
So, you were referring, very interesting, to having -- still having English speaking, Hebrew speaking and Arabic speaking students in your class. How have relations -- do your students -- do you have as many Arabic students as you ever did? What -- pragmatically, what's going on in your classes in the light of the violence that's been going on there?

Alkalay-Gut:
It's very interesting. I've never had a conversation in class about what's going on. But I remember last year, last semester, I taught an introductory course in poetry, a 150 students. First day there was a bombing that day and I walked into the class the first day and I read Yates's, "The Stolen Child." You know, come away to the waters of the world, with the fairy hand in hand for the world's more full of weeping than you can understand. And there were kids crying in that class over that poem. And they were Arabic and they were Jew, everybody wanted to get out of there. I mean, there were certain things that they all had in common. I think I have about 10% to 15% Arabic students, maybe more. I don't always identify them. I don't -- they'll make that distinction. But, there has been a great deal of polarization lately, because people don't trust each other. And understandably.

Rubin:
When you think poetry, and poetry is your way of connecting, obviously connecting.

Alkalay-Gut:
It's my only hope, right? That's the only last hope.

Rubin:
Let me go back to the issue of writing, composing actually. So, if you came away from the class and these thoughts clicked, how does Karen do a poem? Does a line come into your head? Does the image come first? Does the shape of the poem come to you only in the process? How do you actually go about writing? Not that there's one way, but...

Alkalay-Gut:
I don't know, it's -- it comes many different ways and sometimes it comes from a line on television or a line someone gives to me or something that someone says to me that I want to counter. Or just some music that comes into my head. I work many different ways and I work a lot with music. Sometimes music brings you nonsense that becomes sense. I try to keep it as open as possible, because I think it's all there, like Keith Richards said. He said something else like, "They are transmitting it all over the place and you just have to get your antenna out and pull it in." I feel that way about poetry.

Rubin:
Are you the kind of poet that might be writing in an notebook or an envelope or gray piece of paper at any point during the day or do you have your –

Alkalay-Gut:

I might be, but I'm not. I haven't been doing that. I used to do that a lot and for some reason, the past year, I write very specifically. I write on a computer the past year and very channeled. But I used to like the idea of, you know, sitting in a café and listening to people and just registering what people say or what's in my head. I haven't been doing that lately though.

Rubin:
You're a translator yourself, you've translated poetry from Yiddish and Arabic, etc. I believe. How is it to be a poet at the -- not only at the vortex of history, but at the vortex of languages, surrounded by so many oral and written traditions and voices. I mean, Russian is one, I know, and many -- what does that do for you as a poet.

Alkalay-Gut:
Well, first I have to admit I don't know Arabic and the Arabic I translate is with the help of the poets.

Rubin:
Right. A poet's way of translating.

Alkalay-Gut:
I've done -- I know a little Arabic, I know a little Russian, I know a little of this, little of that. And usually poets help me and I work with translations in other languages as well. But I do know Yiddish and I do know Hebrew and German, you know, I know that well enough to translate. And sometimes I translate so that I can understand it, you know. I can read a poem in a foreign language and not really get it. So, it has to go through me, it has to go through my body and then I translate it. and sometimes people even pay me.

Rubin:
Well, let's talk about your origins as a poet. Sometime said that an unhappy family and or moving around, moving around in youth, these are good things to create writers to stir up the creative imagination. What did you begin even the notion that you would be a poet or write poetry? When did it come to you as something that mattered enough to devote yourself to it?

Alkalay-Gut:
I don't know. I know that -- my earliest memories is my mother complaining that I don't fill out the page.

Rubin:
In a poem or just in writing?

Alkalay-Gut:
Just in anything. I kept saying, "your space is important, the space around it is the picture of whatever it was." She, "No, no, no, you're using -- don't waste the paper." But I remember in 5th grade I had been going to a religious school until I was in 5th grade and 5th grade was when I went to public school, and the teacher one day said, "Now, I want you to write whatever you feel like it. Whatever you feel like writing."

And I was so overwhelmed I just started writing. The kids in the class finished the class, they went home, I just kept writing. Soon as someone said, "Write what you feel like," I was in a different world and I've been there ever since.

Rubin:
Well, you actually come from a family, like so many families, is related -- the reason you came to the United States, is related to the fact of the Holocaust. Can you briefly say something about your family's migration?

Alkalay-Gut:
There are many reasons why I shouldn't be here today. There are many points in my family's history where the rest of them were destroyed and I wasn't. The town that my parents came from, one day the German's came in and shot 5000 people, including my -- all my aunts and uncles, their children, on my mother's side at least, parents, you know, their cousins, their relatives. So, essentially, if my parents hadn't escaped from that town, because they were bad children and wanted to live somewhere else or had to live somewhere else, they would have been killed then. They went to Danzig, which was an international city, because my father had no papers.

Rubin:
They were coming from Lithuania.

Alkalay-Gut:
Coming from Lithuania. And they lived there for a few years where my father was beaten alternately by the Nazis for being Jewish and by the authorities for having been a communist when he was 16. They escaped from Danzig the night that Hitler invaded and went to the relative safety in the Blitz in London.

Rubin:
Shelter [inaudible].

Alkalay-Gut:
Shelter, right, right. And I remember as a 3 year old walking down the street and my mother showing me the spot where she was walking towards my father before I was born and a bomb fell between them. So, there were a lot of reasons why I shouldn't be here. And I'm still here, amazingly enough. The Holocaust influences everything in my life, my mother lost everything, everyone in her family. My father discovered very gradually a few of his sisters and brothers were alive, but the rest of his family was not. We're still discovering relatives. Just the past month we discovered some new relatives that escaped Uruguay and didn't know about it. So, the Holocaust really influenced a great deal of my life.

Rubin:
And you went through your graduate degree, your doctorate at the University of Rochester in Literature. You wrote about Adelaide Crapsey, did you say?

Alkalay-Gut:

No, I wrote about Adelaide Crapsey later and kind of longing for a nostalgia for Rochester. When I was at Rochester I wrote about Theodore Roethke

Rubin:
Roethke, your dissertation was on Roethke.

Alkalay-Gut:
Yeah, yeah.

Rubin:
What about Roethke mattered to you enough to write about him? He's such a fine poet, what is it you took from Roethke?

Alkalay-Gut:
Something that I still wonder about. The fact that there are no words to describe what he does. I started it because -- I started my thesis because is at in a class dumb, and the teacher said to me, "Why aren't you saying anything about Roethke, I have no language for him." So he said, "Find one." And that was an assignment. You write the paper on Roethke. And I found that there are a lot of things that he does, even today, that are recognized because we don't have a language for the kind of music that he created, the kind of layers he used in poetry that were psychological and, you know, historical and political and all kinds of things at the same time and personal. I'd love to be able to imitate that, to write about myself and to be writing about the rest of the world, humanity, the history of the world, you know, all at once.

Rubin:
So, maybe the belly dancing Tel Aviv March 2002 in some way just derived from –

Alkalay-Gut:
It's a rustic poem.

Rubin:
-- an homage to Routhke. But music obviously matters to you. Roethke's music is so rhythmic.

Alkalay-Gut:
Yes.

Rubin:
It's quite unusual really in the American tradition.

Alkalay-Gut:
Yes.

Rubin:
At least a successful poet.

Alkalay-Gut:
And people think of it as kind of soporific that, you know, they forget what it means, or you don't pay attention to what it means because it

sounds so good and it sounds so musical, but I think that the music has its own meaning and has another level to the significance.

Rubin:
When did you publish your own work first?

Alkalay-Gut:
I started publishing in Hebrew first. I whisper that. I realize that I can't even say it out loud. I wrote a lot, I never thought of publishing. Some poets in Israel discovered me, translated me and when I saw it was coming out in Hebrew and it looked good, I started sending it to the states. Now, the problem with publishing in the United States when you come from -- or when you are writing in Israel, I had no telephone. I have to, you know, go to the post office, send it out. It would take 6, 7 months before I would hear whether the poem was accepted. It was really a draw back and I really didn't have much of an interest in that kind of distance from an audience. So, I never published much in the United States unless I was asked. I always published when somebody asked me about, "Do you have anything? Can you send me something?" and then I felt much better about it. But in Hebrew I always had a very -- it was a very literary country when I was starting to publish and there was a great deal of demand and a great deal of encouragement. And I was drawn out of my privacy.

Rubin:
We both revere and both have known the great Israel Poet, Yehuda Amichai, who's got admirers around the world. Would you say something about him and his significance to you?

Alkalay-Gut:
Amazing. He was one of the first poets I met in Israel and the reason he was one of the first poets is because he was understandable, even to someone with a limited vocabulary. But, the more you read someone like Amichai, the more you realize that Hebrew is something that, you know, was newly invented, was reinvented in the past 100 years, but it really is 5000 years old. So, you start -- there's a word that maybe very modern, but if you look it up it's also something that was in the Bible. And that's what Amichai is like, he's something that is -- he's very contemporary, but his references are way way back. And that amazed me. It put me off writing in Hebrew, because I would never have that kind of control of the language. You know, we say, "my head hurts," and it really means something from, you know, some prophet. You can't say anything really personal, even though it looks like it's really personal, he had amazing control over that.

Rubin:
And yet, his work, for instance, the poem that you are alluding to that I often use with students who don't have any of that context for it. His work translates so well and just across cultures.

Alkalay-Gut:
Right.

Rubin:

And I can't think of a poet, to me anyway, is so universal human.

Alkalay-Gut:
Right.

Rubin:
Why is that?

Alkalay-Gut:
I don't know. I don't know, because it's so simple, it's just so simple. His images are just so simple. There's a poem that I just translated recently that I though, amazing, no one every translated it. it's about a man who sees a man walking on the street and he's wearing a skull cap and he says, "I recognize the material, it's the same material as my girlfriend's underwear." And that's all he says. You know, the same fabric, the same pattern, the same fabric, the same pattern. And what he's saying is that the erotic and the religious are the same. But all he says is, "I recognize that material.

Rubin:
I'm going to ask you to read a poem to Amichai, who died, of course, just oh a year or so ago.

Alkalay-Gut:
The minister of poetry.
In Hebrew (speaking foreign language) which sounds much better.
The ministry of poetry.
We were walking by the labor party office one night on Hiakone [assumed spelling] Street.
The lights were on and you said, "They are choosing the ministers for the new government,
I should go in and tell them that they need me as the minister of poetry."
But instead we went on to read at the American Embassy.
It was a large crowd there and drinks and little sandwiches, a short speech by some professor
and someone else important said something about a short list for the big prize.
And the evening was over, without a single political word, but you remain for me, from that night on, always, the minister of poetry.

Rubin:
Well, thank you. So, what was it like to know him?

Alkalay-Gut:
Amazing. I didn't even know how to begin to describe it. A very very personable person. He was accessible to anyone. You called his number, his number was in the phone book. You called his number, he'd say come over, come and visit, have some tea. There was no sense of the great poet. He was loved, just simply loved by a lot of people.

Rubin:
A nation mourned when he died, but how important is poetry in Israel generally beyond the figure of Amichia? After all, he fought in the

original war and had been part of Israeli culture from the founding anyway. How important is poetry?

Alkalay-Gut:
Until very recently poetry was incredibly important. Poetry was what you gave your girlfriend when you were trying to seduce her. Poetry was -- I mean, at Amichai's funeral ministers spoke and they all talked about how they read this poem, they woo their wife with this poem by Amichai, they read this poem in the army when they were under attack and this poem gave them strength. There was a great deal of personal significance to poetry. Recently I think the relevance of poetry has diminished greatly. There's a lot of sociological and reasons for it, but I think the relevance in Hebrew poetry has diminished.

Rubin:
Is that at the -- in some sense in favor of the novel or other literary modes or is literature –

Alkalay-Gut:
The novel is very, yes.
The novel is very very big right now, but I think it's partly in favor of other languages, that there's a lot of Russian poetry. But, also, there's a change in the mood of the people. The mood of the publications it used to be that every newspaper had a literary supplement and every literary supplement published poetry at least a couple poems a week. This seems to have diminished as people become more economically minded, poetry isn't cost effective. And, so, that's gone. Literary magazines have diminished. The government spending, government subsidies for literary organizations have diminished. They think of it more as an economic institution and, you know, novels make money. Now, people can support themselves with novels in Israel. Here with poetry there's no way you are going to support yourself. You are always going to be a burden on the –

Rubin:
Why does this sound familiar?

Alkalay-Gut:
Right.

Rubin:
You have been and are you still the Chair of the Israel Association of Writers in English?

Alkalay-Gut:
Yes, I am.

Rubin:
And you've had several other -- you have other sort of organizational positions and interests and I just wonder, is literary life highly organized?

Alkalay-Gut:
No.

Rubin:
So, it's kind of a defensive organization.

Alkalay-Gut:
It was organized, it was organized when it was kind of like a worker's union. And there were government subsidies for most of these organizations for writer's associations. There's a building in the center of Tel Aviv that is for Hebrew Writer's Association. You know, for events and for archives, there are archives of all writers. But, for some reason everything is falling apart right now. I don't think it's a permanent situation. But the moment it isn't working very well. English writing is doing very well, thank you.

Rubin:
That's interesting.

Alkalay-Gut:
Because English writing a few years ago was very embarrassing, people were ashamed to admit they had lived in Israel and they don't know Hebrew, but they were writing in English. But since the internet and since this political situation that is so -- that is so in need of explanation, a lot of English writers have become some kind of creative non-fiction writers, journalists, explanation, you know, explainers of the situation.

Rubin:
This is a good chance to ask you as our time is kind of unfortunately going, as it does. I ask you about your own online -- I've been reading and many people read you online with your Tel Aviv journal. The most interesting project. How did that come to be? What are you trying to do with it?

Alkalay-Gut:
I thought I was all alone there. And I thought I started this journal because I thought I have got to be -- if I do it online and I make these rules that I can't reread it, I can't rewrite it, I can't edit it, I have to write and, you know, whatever I write, stays. And it's online, so I f I do lie and I do cheat, someone will know. That's how I started it. I also thought I was going to blow up any minute, so it wasn't going to matter. But I, you know, I just wanted that document before I blew up.

Rubin:
So, it's a document of your thoughts every day and just daily life.

Alkalay-Gut:
Yeah.

Rubin:
What you heard, what you –

Alkalay-Gut:
It's highly sensitive. I don't talk about, you know, what I bought at the supermarket or what I did [inaudible]

Rubin:
So, your intent is to convey the flavor of lived experience during this time of conflict.

Alkalay-Gut:
Right. Right, and I try not to write about my private lives of my colleagues, although might be a good idea. I try to just keep that one focus, the political situation and the personal experience of the political situation.

Rubin:
Let me ask, should be give the web address for anyone watching this?

Alkalay-Gut:
Why not?

Rubin:
Maybe it won't be there by the time they see this, because the need will be gone.

Alkalay-Gut:
I hope the need is gone, but it's http w -- you know, slash, the www.geocities.com/alkalay a-l-k-a-l-a-y, underscore g-u-t. Which is obviously a free site.

Rubin:
But you have a lot of work.

Alkalay-Gut:
Which was part of it.

Rubin:
I'd like you to briefly talk about the internet in terms of being a poet. You have a lot of your work and constantly adding to work that's online for people anywhere to read, to download, what's your feeling about the internet? Which is after all, neither of us is just out of school and we didn't grow up with the computer at hand when we were young. What's your feeling about it? Why some poets have shied away from it.

Alkalay-Gut:
Oh, I love the internet. I think the idea that I was telling you about before, about the transitoriness of literature and how poetry has to be something that is transitory, it suits the idea of the internet. That today I am a, you know, 57 and I am, you know, my doctor diagnosed this disease, tomorrow I won't have it. I think that's great. I think it's such an amazing thing. I think that we could see it in the reactions to disasters. I wish it were reactions to good things, but I wrote a great deal about September 11 and the way people reacted to it and the way they were so genuine. And a year after when they were much more polished.

Rubin:
Meaning Americans and Israelis?

Alkalay-Gut:

Americans, Israelis, everybody all over the world. Everybody was writing about this. They were writing real feelings, gut feelings. Maybe it wasn't great poetry, maybe it was, but they wouldn't have published it a year later, you know, because then they would be much more controlled and unintelligent.

Rubin:
So, you're arguing to be closer to the elemental and the raw.

Alkalay-Gut:
Right, right. I think it's an interesting idea. Maybe it's not good in the long run. Maybe my first teacher, Jack Kerouac, when he said, "First thought, best thought" was -- maybe he was wrong.

Rubin:
Kerouac was your teacher, we have to ask that?

Alkalay-Gut:
No, not personally. I mean, he was the first guy I read. The first –

Rubin:
Taught many years.

Alkalay-Gut:
First reader of poetry that I ever heard.

Rubin:
First thought, best thought, right.

Alkalay-Gut:
It includes, "First thought, best thought" was amazing to me. and maybe it's wrong, but it seems to work a lot.

Rubin:
It's a mode of being that we don't experience a lot in our very controlled, civilized lives. The notion of not elemental theme allows me to move quickly to two perhaps related topics. Sex and feminism. You already mentioned feminism in terms of Belly Dancing. A close friend of yours I think is Alicia Ostriker, the American feminist poet.

Alkalay-Gut:
Yes, yes.

Rubin:
And some of your work has been published by feminist presses in Canada and elsewhere, what is your sense of feminism and poetry? What is -- do you think it was something that feminist -- all right, now.

Alkalay-Gut:
It's like what we were saying before about Jerusalem, I'm against anything that will force you to a doctrine. But I think that poetry is a way to discover things and I think that feminism hasn't even begun to discover the wonderful possibilities of, you know, if feminism as a movement hasn't yet discovered a great deal that is possible in poetry.

And I think poetry usually picks up on these things before movements do. So, I think poetry is a great thing. But you asked me about sex and feminism.

Rubin:
Yes. I have it in front of me and some years ago a pamphlet you published in the US, a little chaplet called, "High School Girls, Mothers, Grandmothers and Other Sex Maniacs." It's a playful title, but I just wonder a lot of your poetry is erotic.

Alkalay-Gut:
Yes.

Rubin:
And some of it is quite blunt or unashamed about, you know, poets shouldn't be ashamed, but, I mean, it talks about things that some poets talk about and others don't. Explicitly about the body, about sexuality, about desire, does this come partly from Amichai, or where does this –

Alkalay-Gut:
No, it comes from my mother. My mother when she was 80 I asked her, "When do you stop with sex?" and she said, "Ask me in another 10 years." And it was a very important thing. That's what the title is connected to.
But, I was also very influenced by Ann Sexton. And even today when I mention the name Ann Sexton, a lot of my colleagues will say, "You know, you can read her, but don't brag about it." but I still find her a very very fascinating poet. And partly because of that, she was right out there. To use the self, to use everything that you have as a means for poetry.

Rubin:
Are there American poets that are well read, contemporary poets that are being read in Israel by –

Alkalay-Gut:
Everybody. Everybody. There's a book of Adrian Richards just came out. And a lot of it is very critical of Israel, it just came out in Hebrew. In fact, I'm missing right now, even as we speak, the evening and celebration of that.

Rubin:
They do evening celebrations of new books coming out?

Alkalay-Gut:
Oh, yes. And well attended, well attended. Whitman -- there was a book of Whitman's that just came out last month. Matthews, there's a lot of poets that have just been translated and a lot of poets who have been translated all along.

Rubin:
I think we are unfortunately at the end, probably, of this conversation, which has raised so many interesting points. I wonder if I could ask you to read a poem just to take us out with poetry. But just before that,

what would you like readers of your poetry or students to know about you or about poetry?

Alkalay-Gut:
I don't know. I think that poetry is one of the most important tools for understanding our self. I think it's better than a shrink, better than conversation. It's a way, it's like a crossword puzzle of the self and it's a crossword puzzle of the situation, the society and I think that everyone should write poetry. Most people shouldn't publish it, but I think that it's a wonderful thing to do. It's a wonderful -- I was going to say exercise, but I think it's more of a meditation and it's very important. It shouldn't matter whether anyone else wants to read it or not, it should matter at least initially whether it satisfies the self. And for me I wrote poetry for 20 years before I even thought about publishing it.

Rubin:
That I think is a rare, but excellent prescription. We have such a lust to be in print. I'm going to ask you to read perhaps the -- not trying to trick you, but a little erotic poem. Because there's a lot of interest about it. It's supposed to be shaped and this version isn't.

Alkalay-Gut:
It was supposed to be shaped and it was supposed to be bigger, because it's supposed to be the size of a diaphragm and it –

Rubin:
It's supposed to be circular poem.

Alkalay-Gut:
It is, it's like I'm bragging here.
Okay. A poem the size of my diaphragm, closing out all germs, sperm and loving from my womb.
Sealing, growing off, making our act end where we begin.
This is not a trick, I think of my sex life as an intensified microcosm of the world outside, the snide remark you might have made notwithstanding.
There are no truths greater to me than those proven in the hay on my own body.
This was -- can I explain this?
Because this was the first poem through a book called Mohitza, which was a Yiddish corruption of a Hebrew word, meaning, "division." And the whole book was about separations and divisions. And the diaphragm was the first division between the reader and the poet. There's something that is keeping us apart one way or another.

Rubin:
And it seems if your poetry and that poem are all in favor of our joining self and other. Karen Alkalay, thank you very much for talking with us today.

Alkalay-Gut:
Thank you very much.

Rubin:
See you back here and good luck on your future work.

Alkalay-Gut:
Thank you very much, Stan.