

AN INTERVIEW WITH MAXINE KUMIN, 2010

Chard deNiord

In the arc of your poetry, from your first book in 1961 to your most recent in 2007, there is a recognizable progression, from family history and biography in *Halfway* (1961) to bold personal awakening as a young woman in *The Privilege* (1968) to farm life at the start of your long georgics and marriage in *The Nightmare Factory* (1970) and *Up Country* (1972). Your agon with religion and patriarchy develops in *House, Bridge, Fountain, Gate* (1975) and grows to an extended, candid reflection on middle age, religion and parenthood in *The Retrieval System* (1978). An abiding dialectic between elegy and pastoral follows in *Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief* (1982), *The Long Approach* (1985), *Nurture* (1989), *Looking for Luck* (1992), and *Connecting the Dots* (1996). And your last two books, *Jack* (2005) and *Still to Mow* (2007), have contained personal and political poems of witness about the war in Iraq. So, if one reads your poems as voice-finding ventures from the start he sees a fascinating dialectic throughout your career between rebellion and conformity, between your Catholic upbringing and Jewish heritage, between received forms and free verse, between your atheism and periods of agnosticism, between your chthonic strength as a woman with extraordinary life force and the mystery of the awaiting darkness, between your anger and resentment toward American patriarchy and your hard-won liberation from it as a successful poet with a courageous feminine voice that increases in volume with each new book.

MAXINE KUMIN That's a very rich summation. I can't step outside myself to see it in to, and I don't entirely agree.

CD It's only my summary of what I consider a remarkable arc. Please take issue with me at any point if you feel I have misrepresented you.

MK Well, much of it rings true, but I don't see any wavering between agnosticism and atheism. I've been an atheist since the age of about 16. God in my poems is sometimes used as a rhetorical device.

CD What's particularly remarkable, I think, is that your poems recently have become more and more confident, strident, bold, courageous, without losing their lyrical power. Often there's a kind of diminuendo in one's career as one grows older. But you are taking bolder, more practiced steps than ever in your recent work, *Jack* and *Still to Mow*. While not all the poems work as well as perhaps you'd like, you're taking risks with the rendition and torture poems that are remarkable for their witness to Bush's and Rumsfeld's overleaping Constitutional tenets and basic human rights. I'm hard-pressed to think of many younger women and men writing today with the same political vocabulary. With the same confidence about the poetry of witness.

MK When Galway Kinnell introduced me at a reading I gave recently at the Atheneum in St. Johnsbury, Vermont, I was struck when he said much the same thing about those poems. I think I've been praised and damned in equal measure for the so-called torture poems, so to have him choose them for singular praise really touched me. And it is true that at this point in my life I feel that I have nothing to lose. I'm not thinking in terms of reputation or next book. I'm just writing what is wrung from me.

CD Even though you've already written so many poems about your horses and farm life, do you feel these subjects continue to provide a rich source of inspiration for you?

MK I'm still writing an awful lot of poems about my animals. I have an old broodmare who is supposed to be dying, and I've just written two more poems about her.

CD Do you see any connection between your public poems of witness and your domestic, pastoral poems?

MK The poems I am speaking of now, about the horses and dogs, are poetry of witness in their own way.

CD How would you say you cross that boundary, between the pastoral and the political?

MK Well to me, my so-called animal poems, for instance, are truly political. We've been in the rescue business for about 40 years and this little dog that you just met is our newest waif. She came up from Tennessee in April from a horrible life, unspeakable life, and we were told we could never let her loose because she would run and run and never be seen again. And here she is, totally at liberty.

CD Yes.

MK We've rescued a number of dogs and we've also rescued several horses.

CD That's witnessing on a whole other front.

MK I seem unable to keep them out of my work. Imagine writing two sonnets about dogs--see Still to Mow. Xochi, in "Xochi's Tale," unfortunately died last October and in April we took in Rosie. She came with a grade three or four heart murmur, so she's on medication. We didn't know her age but our vet says she's ten years old. If you could see her streaking across the pastures and trotting on top of the stone walls I think you'd agree that if she drops dead tomorrow she will have had a life.

CD Your poems of witness, whether they're about Iraq or Cheney or your dogs or your horses, emanate from a strong compassion that you have in the face of enormous, insurmountable obstacles. I heard yesterday that the government plans to kill 3,500 mustangs in Nevada because they don't know what to do with all of these horses. Have you heard this?

MK It's an old sad story. It's because they've given all of the grazing rights to cattle. The Bureau of Land Management leases it to farmers for pennies per acre and the land cannot sustain wild horses and all the meat that we seem to feel we have to eat. Don't get me started.

CD Just as you've always kept watch on such national issues as cruelty to animals, human torture and environmental pollution, you've also always kept your hands busy in your own soil.

MK Yes, you should see my vegetable garden. I'll take you up.

CD I would love to. Not only do you have a green thumb but a tireless love for dogs and horses.

MK Well, I apparently came with this tireless love because when I was a child I was always bringing something home and saying, "He followed me--can I keep him?"

CD Your early poems are a gold mine as far as how you move from your questions of self hood as a young woman in 1942 through 1945, to finding yourself as a poet piercing the world with your own voice during a time of powerful recrudescence among other women poets, particularly Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. There is a strident courage and rawness in your voice, but also an abiding quality. You used that word, "abiding," in your poem "Morning Swim," which shows a patience ...

MK A stubbornness.

CD In your poem "The Pawn Broker," you express an implicit stubbornness as you strive to create your own nascent identity as a young poet. You refer to your father as "a man of great personal order." You also attribute him with passing down to you "a love ingrown, tight as an oyster." In fact, the stanza in which this line appears in "The Pawn Broker" evinces the "ingrown" love you claim as both your inheritance and lesson from your father, and the exquisite jewel it produced. "Firsthand I had from my father a love ingrown / tight as an oyster, and returned it / as secretly. From him firsthand / the grace of work, the sweat of it, the bone- / tired unfolding down from stress. / I was the bearer he paid up on demand / With one small pearl of self hood. Portionless, / I am oystering still to earn it."

MK I didn't write them out of anger, as you suggested before. Actually I worshipped my father, but he was the autocrat. There's no question about it.

CD In your poem "Life's Work" from House Bridge, Fountain, Gate, you essentially designate your father as a member of the patriarchy in the line: "Well, the firm old fathers are dead, and I didn't come to grief."

MK Right.

CD But you did come to words, as you go on to say in the same poem. "I came to words instead,/to tell the little tale that's left.: / the midnights of my childhood still go on." You downplay your heroic narrative by calling it a "little tale" and you deftly describe your mother's oppressive life in haunting, musical lines that close the poem. "The stairs speak again under your foot / the heavy parlor door folds shut / and Claire de Lune / puckers from the obedient keys / plain as a schoolroom clock ticking / and what I hear more clearly than Debussy's / lovesong is the dry aftersound / of your long nails clicking."

MK Well, my mother was a prisoner. She was a captive of her upwardly mobile yearnings.

CD That's quietly angry.

MK But it took me a long time to come to terms with my mother because I was never the popular outgoing daughter that she intended.

CD Not for your father also?

MK Well, I don't know about my father. He thought I could do anything. I think the crowning moment was when my first book came out just a year before he died. I don't think ... I doubt that he ever read it, but at least he held it in his hands and he could say, "My daughter is a writer." And that was sacred, you know?

CD And there's also that wonderful poem about your attempt to be a communist at Radcliffe.

MK Yes (laughing). Well, that was my one moment of open rebellion, telling him to go ahead and try to yank me out of Radcliffe. I'm staying no matter what. I'll get a scholarship and a work-study job and hang on. He backed right down and we never discussed it again.

CD Right, but then you also left those friends.

MK I did, I didn't have the courage to continue going out at 6 a.m. to organize for the CIO at the Fore River Shipyard. It was 1942, you might say ironically that it was my contribution to the war effort. The funny thing is, I look at some of these people--one of them was my friend Bobby Lewis; we took accelerated Russian together, two Cliffies in a group of army privates learning Russian in the student training program--and I see what traditional citizens we turned out to be. She married Bob Solow, who went on to win a Nobel prize in economics. She was about as red as you can get. Another one of that group of us picketing the shipyard is now a professor at Harvard.

CD Is it really true the FBI told your father that you were consorting with communists?

MR Yes, absolutely true.

CD There is a lot of family history in your early poems, which are beautifully narrated, but they are also lyrical in just the right spots. Would you go so far as to call these poems "confessional"?

MR Well, it depends on your definition of confessional. My poems were certainly autobiographical, so that qualifies them in one sense as confessional.

CD Your poems "Sperm," "The Thirties Revisited," and "Heaven is Anus," all from *House, Bridge, Fountain, Gate* in 1975, are further evidence of the marriage of your public and confessional muses. This voice's double duty is strongly evident in such lines from "The Thirties Revisited" as "Soon enough the uncles will give thanks/for GI uniforms to choose / and go off tough as terriers to dig their holes. / Warsaw will excrete its last Jews." And then a few lines later you shift without losing a beat to this remarkable private adolescent scene with you and your mother, moving from the world on the verge of bloody war to your own personal bleeding. "This is the year that mother stiffens. / She undresses in the closet giving me / her back as if I can't see / her breasts fall down like pufferfish, / the life gone out of their crusty eyes / But who has punctured the bathroom light? / Why does the mattress moan at night / and why is nothing good/said of all the business to come /--the elastic belt with its metal tongue--/ when my body, that surprise, / claps me into my first blood?" It seems you have been writing poems of witness all along. Are you aware of this?

MK I was not aware of it. Looking back they seem much more daring.

CD They were daring. A stanza like this, for instance from "Sperm," which you wrote in the late sixties, is still daring. "Oh grandfather, what is it saying, / these seventeen cousins-german / descending the same number of steps / their chromosomes tight as a chain gang / their genes like innocent porters / a milk churn of spermatozoa? You have to admire the product--/ bringing forth sons to be patriots / daughters to dance like tame puppets--/ half of them dead or not speaking / while Sukey and James, the end of the line / keep house in the gentlest tradition / of spinster and bachelor sweetheart."

MR Yes.

CD "The product," you call it?

MR That led me ultimately to Wordsworth and Dorothy. That's a subject that has fascinated me for years.

CD You've written about them three or four times. Do you know what the fascination is exactly?

MR It was serendipitous. I just stumbled on Dorothy Wordsworth's journals from their time together at Grasmere. I bought that book and I couldn't put it down.

CD Have you been to Grasmere?

MK No.

CD You wouldn't believe the house, it's a barn. It's the most sparse, cold place you could imagine.

MK No wonder he went into the woods to alter his poems [first line' of poem], he didn't have a decent study.

CD Oh, you have to see these hills where he walked.

MK They were too poor to have horses, so they walked.

CD Well, that's the first thing I thought, the poverty.

MK And there Dorothy was toiling in the garden, picking peas and tying up the scarlet runner beans.

CD What was it about their relationship that fascinates you?

MK Even for its time it seemed odd. More than odd ... I don't know if their relationship was incest or not. They lived together for seven years, and then he took her to France to meet his mistress, and then she couldn't go to his wedding because she was afraid she would ruin it by weeping. And he gave her the wedding ring to wear the day before the wedding. I mean, what does that tell you?

CD That it was a little incestuous?

MK A little?

CD Very?

MK So, maybe that's what must have fascinated me way back when I started to write about all these cousins. "Sperm" and "The Thirties Revisited" are part truth, part invention.

CD You were both personally and poetically immersed in the era of Confessionalism in the sixties and early seventies through your own writing but also through your close friendship with Anne Sexton. In Conradian terms, it seems you were to Anne Sexton as Marlow was to Kurtz. Did you ever get a clear sense of the darkness she was looking into, and if so, how did that awareness affect your own work?

MK Well, of course, I had a very strong sense of the darkness she was looking into. There were probably six or seven attempted suicides over the seventeen years of our enduring friendship and some of the early ones perhaps were staged, but before I ever met her she had tried seriously to take her own life. She had a severe postpartum depression.

CD Yes, and she suffered from bipolar disorder as well.

MK The terminology is just that--naming something little understood. While I had a, strong sense of the darkness she was looking into, but I don't know that it ... it's a funny thing. We were able somehow to have a close relationship, an intense personal relationship.

CD YOU won the Pulitzer Prize for *Up Country*, which contains many persona poems in the voice of Henry the hermit. You said you thought people were more likely to read poems in a man's voice than in a woman's. But Sexton and Plath had already proven otherwise by the time *Up Country* was published. Many poems in *Privilege* and *The Nightmare Factory* address the same familial and personal topics that Plath and Sexton had written about, but it's not until *House, Bridge, Fountain, Gate* that you really delve into a recrudescence mode in poems such as "Sperm," "The Thirties Revisited," "Heaven as Anus," "Life's Work," "The Jesus Infection," "Song for Seven Parts of the Body." Were you emboldened by Anne to write some of these poems, especially after her death?

MK I can't say for sure, but I don't think I was emboldened by the Sexton and Plath poems. Somehow Anne and I were able to energize the process of writing by listening to each other's starts and false starts, but we were each absolutely singular in voice and intent. This was conscious though largely unspoken between us. If we intruded on each other's work, it would be, as I see it, that my diction freshened, I began to avoid Latinate constructions, unnecessary adjectives, and began to develop a more muscular vocabulary. What I brought to Anne's works was the reliance on form, on rhyme and off-rhyme, especially as ways to deal with such heavily confessional poems as "Cripples and Other Stories," which was literally in the wastebasket until I urged her to take it out and pound it into form. The recrudescence you speak of in the poems in *House, Bridge, Fountain, Gate* onward I think merely represents my increasing faith in myself as I grew as a poet. If these are more daring, more overt, it is because I felt I now had some stature and could tackle these themes. As for the hermit and Henry poems, I really did not think a female hermit would carry the weight of my invented male. And Henry was, after all, Henry. Much of what I wrote about him was true. Some was invented. When Anne killed herself in October of 1974, I felt for a long time that the "fun" had gone out of writing poems. The fun

of sharing early worksheets, the fun of reshaping, cutting, adding, the whole sport of revving up, of developing the poem. And the other loss--I am speaking of our professional relationship--was that she would not be there as we spread the poems for the next book out on the floor and tested what poems went with what others, what comprised a section, etc. The fun of format, if I may call it that, something we had always done for and with each other.

CD You conclude your elegy for Anne, "How It Is," with this promise. "Dear friend you have excited crowds / with your example. They swell / like wine bags, straining at your seams. / I will be years gathering up our words, / fishing out letters, snapshots, stains, / leaning my ribs against this durable cloth / to put on the dumb blue blazer of your death." These are timeless lines. Thirty-four years after Anne's death, do you feel you've carried Anne's mantle, worn her "blazer," while maintaining your own distinct voice?

MK I certainly feel I've maintained my own voice. "The dumb blue blazer" that I carry is, I think, common to anyone who has lost a dear friend to suicide. I've written several elegies to Anne, some addressed directly to her as in "How It Is" and "Splitting Wood at Six Above," others in the third person. I hope that with "The Revisionist Dream" in *Still to Mow* I'm finally shriven. I say that with more confidence than I feel.

CD With regard to some of your other influences, I see strong influences of Auden in your work.

MK Well, Auden absolutely, I'm happy to own up to Auden.

CD How about Elizabeth Bishop?

MK I don't think I was influenced at all by Bishop. I hardly read her at that time.

CD You're often compared to Bishop.

MK But it's true I had hardly read her. We sat next to each other once at a dinner in Harvard's Leverett House and she showed me pictures of her pet goats. I was too shy to utter a word about poetry so we just talked about animals.

CD But there's a similar perspicacity, clarity and accomplished formalism in your work.

MK Well, it's possible that we may have shared some of the same impulses, but I don't think so.

CD How about Robert Frost and John Holmes?

MK Well, John Holmes of course was my Christian academic daddy, he conducted the first workshop I ever took part in, and he got me my first ever job, teaching freshman comp part time at Tufts. There were two men who were very helpful to me. One of them was my tutor at Harvard, Harry Levin, who interceded for me after I flunked the Latin exam required for my Master's. At that time you had to write out translations from one modern and one ancient language. The French was easy, and I thought I would ace the Latin, on the basis of my top grades in high school, but I didn't. Levin stepped in and said, "Since it's obvious this candidate is not going on to pursue studies for her Ph.D. at this time"--I

was eight months pregnant--"I vote we grant her the degree." And they did. So the master's degree was my ticket to my first teaching job.

CD That was equivalent to an MFA in those days.

MK Well, there was only Iowa's MFA program at that time. And because I was a woman I was only allowed to teach the phys-ed majors and the dental technicians. John Holmes, who was a professor in the English Department there, was a major influence on my emerging self as poet. He took Anne and me to New York to a meeting of the then-nascent Poetry Society of America. He took us over to Harpers Magazine to meet Bob Silvers, who was the poetry editor. I credit him with really boosting me in as many ways as he could and giving me a visibility that probably helped me to break into some of those major publications. Garnering these credits for the acknowledgments page, of course, made publishing a book that much easier. And then I should say there were several other men who helped me along. There was Dudley Fitts, who judged the Yale Younger Poets Prize that year and awarded it to George Starbuck for *Bone Thoughts*, a brilliant book, and declared Sylvia and me tied for second place. He found us each a publisher.

CD Did you know her at all?

MK I knew her, but we were only acquainted. It was the year that she and Ted were in Boston and came to meetings of the New England Poetry Club and showed up at various readings around town. We used to call him Ted Huge because he was so tall.

CD Actually, Sylvia refers to him in that way several times in her journal.

MK But anyway, Dudley Fitts found me an editor in Stanley Burnshaw at what was then Holt, Rinehart and Winston and they published "Halfway." I think it was in an edition of 1,000 copies; of these I suspect they pulped 700. But it was a book.

CD It was a book.

MK It was such a thrilling moment.

CD The poem "Halfway," the first poem in your first book of the same title, works as such an effective primer for the poems that follow, establishing your formal skill as a poet in writing courageously about such taboo subjects--at least taboo for women at the time--as madness, atheism, menstruation, incest, family tension, etc.

MK That was my extremely formal period, where virtually every line was metrically exact. Most of the lines end with exact rhymes. It was before I knew about how to use slant approximate--rhyme and it was before I gave myself the freedom to write outside iambic pentameter or tetrameter.

CD Right, but you were good at it.

MK The rhyming, and especially the taut tetrameter line I learned from studying Auden, I considered him my master. I have a little poem that's coming up in *Prairie Schooner*, titled "Symposium." It's a

villanelle about going to hear Auden give a reading. He's always wore his carpet slippers, an unselfconscious act I admired, so one of the refrain lines picks up on the carpet slippers. And you know Stephen Spender is reputed to have said of him, "Poor Auden, pretty soon we'll have to take his face off and iron it out to see who he is."

CD Did you ever meet Auden?

MK No, but I really worshipped the poetry. It was very meaningful to me.

CD You have a similar dual inspiration, to be public one minute and private the next. That's particularly tough to pull off, to be able to speak as resonantly and poignantly in both modes.

MK I've become more courageous as I've aged.

CD I think you've been doing this all along.

MK Well, I don't know about the courage part.

CD Each of your books, from your first to your last, contains strident political poems.

MK Yes, I guess so. "Heaven as Anus" is quite an early poem--I was attacked by Dinesh Di Souza for it.

CD You were?

MK I was indeed. He said it was a pornographic poem. Pornographic? He must have some extreme anal fixation or something.

CD So Allen Ginsberg can write a poem called "Sphincter" but you can't write a poem called "Heaven as Anus."

MK Right. I still like that poem.

CD A religious object lesson.

MK Well, a way of expressing my indignation at the way we abuse animals for our own gain.

CB You turn a lot of Judeo-Christian theology on its head in that poem.

MK I've done that to God a lot.

CD What makes your poems interesting in that area is that they're not two-dimensional announcements. You've got a quarrel going on, which is much more interesting. For instance, your Bread Loaf poem.

MK Oh, "Young Nun at Bread Loaf"?

CD If people didn't know about your background they would think this was your first encounter with a nun. But, of course, you were raised by nuns.

MK But my nuns were in habit, severe black with white wimples, and they were sensational, in a way. They were regal, queen-like in a way that contemporary nuns in their drab mufti just don't rise to.

CD You're drinking your scotch, and she's drinking her tomato juice. And you're smoking a cigarette. But you're still picking mushrooms together.

MK Chanterelles.

CD That's refreshing. There's something going on there that is quite natural.

MK Well, it's a narrative, and I believe so strongly in the place of narrative in poetry, including lyric poems. This is my big quarrel with students. Well, quarrel is an overstatement, but this issue comes up a lot in workshop. I just cannot get excited about a poem that has no narrative thread. It doesn't arouse my interest to the point where I am willing to, how shall I say it, invest in the language of the poem, language without meaning or emotion.

CD I know Philip Levine loves your poems for this reason.

MK Well, talk about narrative thread, you know? Levine rises to the top.

CD You have both relied heavily on narrative. Have you been influenced at all by Levine's work throughout your career?

MK I certainly have enjoyed reading his poems. I'm never bored by a Phil Levine poem. I admire what he does. He's a very angry fellow on the page. Off it, he's a sweet man.

CD But it's that anger that is a vital source of energy, in both your work.

MK Even in the poem I was just referring to in which the vet says, "We'll give her one more season on grass and then we'll put her down. Find a good place to dig the hole." And my rejection of that, because she looks terrific, my supposedly dying horse. I'm not putting her down. So there's a certain edge to my lines.

CD Maybe the word you're searching for here to describe yourself is a defiant.

MK Okay, I think that fits. I'm defying death for her, and I'm actually defying death for myself. You can't live to this age without thinking about it, and how you're going to leave. And I then think back to Emily Dickinson's time when so much emphasis was put on how people die. Did they go calmly? It was important that the end be perceived as gentle. No "rage, rage against the dying of the light." I've chewed on this bone in "Death Etcetera," the last poem in *Still to Mow*.

CD The last lines of the poem capture a profound pathos. 'We try to live gracefully / and at peace with our imagined deaths. But in truth we go forward / stumbling, afraid of the dark / of the cold, and of

the great overwhelming / loneliness of being last."

MK Well, here we are. Victor's going to be 87 next week. I'm 83. And, we're hanging on here. Fortunately, we have a good live-in caretaker.

CD What is especially poignant about these lines is that notion of being last. No matter when you die, you're always the last in some respect. Of your generation, of your family ...

MK Yes, we're both orphaned, in a sense. I've lost three brothers.

CD And you've written a beautiful elegy about your brother Peter called P.W.

MK Yes, my brother Peter. Watching him die of ALS was possibly the hardest single thing in my life.

CD I didn't know it was ALS.

MK He was my closest sibling in age and we remained very close even after he had moved to California with his family. He was an engineer.

CD Like Victor.

MK Yes.

CD What's so striking about this poem in particular is the incest section titled "The Incest Dream." The risk you take in writing such a dream is, again, courageous. Your language rises to the occasion with a haunted, Plath-like syntax, that is nonetheless all your own for the intense private emotion that emanates from your love for your brother.

MK Did Sylvia have a sibling?

CD Yes, a younger brother named Warren who became a well-known mathematician at Harvard. But, again, this poem has your own signature on it as a radical love poem that crosses traditional boundaries with a groundbreaking atavism that transcends sexual taboo. Its sisterly affection and grief are almost overwhelming. This poem scrapes the stone floor of the psyche in a way that's reminiscent of James Wright's elegy, "To the Muse." In both poems, the muse of grief appears to speak directly to the poet.

MK Well, this is the role of poetry.

CD I especially love the way you leap from your confession of love in the penultimate stanza to your dream of your brother's penis in the last stanza. Would you mind if I read these two stanzas to illustrate this point?

MK Not at all.

CD "Listen! I love you! / I've always loved you! / And so we totter and embrace / surrounded in an all-

night garage / by theatergoers barking for their cars, / the obedient machines spiraling down / level by level as we block / the exit saying our good-byes, / you tangled in your cane, my black / umbrella flapping like a torn bat. // At 3 a.m. I'm driven to such extremes / that when the sorrowing hangman / brings me your severed penis still / tumescent from the scaffold / yet dried and pressed as faithfully / as a wildflower / I put it away on my closet shelf / and lie back down in my lucky shame." You are more purely lyrical here than usual. Of course, you are recounting a dream and dreams often have little regard for a coherent narrative. You have also written a lot about your children.

MK It's true. I have used my family shamelessly.

CD Shamelessly?

MK I mean without holding back.

CD The "Bones" poem, the "Soup" poem. You're full of wonderful contradictions in your work. One minute there's this tenderness, this wonderful loving tenderness, and then the next minute they're changelings.

MK Yes, that's what happens when you have teenagers.

CD But the way you write about them, there's an honesty and a closeness to the earth, with a literal attentiveness. Frost wrote in his poem "Revelation," "'Tis a pity if the case require / (Or so we say) that in the end / We speak the literal to inspire / The understanding of a friend." In so many of your poems you speak the literal to a friend without worrying too much about being figurative, and it's working for you.

MK I hope.

CD I was wondering if you could talk a little about this. You said you were stubborn, and often you add that stubborn tension to what actually happened in your poems. Your essay and poem about

Anne Sexton, "How It Is." It's so literal, so attentive to the way it was.

MK Well I've written probably seven or eight elegies for Anne, about Anne, the last of them being "The Revisionist Dream" in *Still to Mow*.

CD It's a villanelle.

MK It's a villanelle. Well that's what I do. When a subject is too hot to handle I use the oven mitts of form.

CD Form reflects the age often, or vice versa, but in looking back on your almost 60 years of writing and publishing, do you feel you've conformed too much or too little with the *de rigueur* of free verse that has largely prevailed as the dominant American form of choice since about 1960?

MK I can't really speak to that because I don't really see what I'm doing while I'm doing it. I'm not

writing as rigorously in form as I did early on, but I think I'm still writing in form for the pure love of it. There are two villanelles in *Still to Mow*. There are two dog sonnets, not quite pure. Also a pantoum. There is a sonnet, the last poem in *Jack*.

CD But there's also the echo of form in most of your work.

MK I love working with slant rhymes. I love hearing that echo in my head as I go along, and I love alternating long lines with short lines, which is what I seem to be doing in my most recent work.

CD Yes, but that music, the rhyming, seems integral to both your breath and voice, wouldn't you say?

MK Yes, I agree.

CD It creates in your reader a sense of expectation. One wants to hear that skill or music you create in poems like "Morning Swim" or "Sisyphus" or "Halfway." Or your sonnets "Purgatory" and "Prothalamion." You talk so subtly to yourself in form and rhyme--in an incantatory way, as you do in "Morning Swim" and "Sisyphus." I love the penultimate couplet in that poem. "One day I said I was a Jew. / I wished I had. I wanted to." You're overhearing yourself in these poems in such a hypnotic way that you lure your reader into your speaker's world or experience to the point of causing her to identify vicariously with your speaker's self-recriminations or confessions or epiphanies.

MK Well thank you. What can I say to that?

CD Am I right about this? Only you would know if you are talking to yourself in your poems.

MK I haven't been conscious of it, but once you point it out, of course, I can see it. And I think I'm still doing that.

CD Your speaker becomes much larger than you. You create a kind of mythic self as a young and older woman who has broken out of the norms and strictures of cultural expectations and found an expression that transcends convention. You create a new way of thinking and talking, for women in particular, through thinking boldly about your most urgent human concerns as a woman.

MK Well, I am a woman poet, and I have to write from that female point of view. I've always been a feminist, I feel in a way that it's my mission now to help young women writers when our paths cross.

CD Some specific avenues you have opened the way for women include writing about your family and your past without censoring yourself, without at the same time shocking your reader for the mere sake of shocking him or her.

MK Yes, but look at what Anne did. She broke all the taboos. I mean it's true. Ginsberg could write a poem called "Sphincter," but when she wrote her poem "In Celebration of My Uterus" or "The Abortion," she was savagely attacked. I think it's shocking to look back and see what James Dickey, of all people, saying he didn't want to hear any more about her internal organs. He was offended. He, who went on to write *Deliverance* with its graphic scene of male rape.

CD For women over the last 60 years personal or confessional poems have also worked as public poems in many ways. Some of the most famous that come immediately to mind are "Lady Lazarus" by Sylvia Plath, "Her Kind" by Anne Sexton, "Morning Swim" by you, "Diving Into the Wreck" by Adrienne Rich, and "Mock Orange" by Louise Gluck.

MK You don't mention Denise Levertov.

CD Yes, of course, Denise Levertov.

MK The funny thing is when Denise was writing all of those poems about the Vietnam War, I was disappointed. I thought she was going down the wrong track. I was afraid she would lose her lyricism in the process. And then of course, I've now done a similar thing in Still to Mow. So I understand much better. And Muriel Rukeyser too. I mean I secretly thought Muriel's poetry was too prosy even while I had great admiration for her courage as a war resister and a protester against dictators of any stripe. Now I read her appreciatively, empathetically. She was a remarkable woman.

CD How about Marianne Moore?

MK Marianne Moore was such a distant figure. The poetry certainly didn't move me when I first came to it. In truth, I don't value working in syllabics in English. Maybe in another language it would be meaningful, for example, in Russian, where the stresses are more obvious--but in slippery English I just don't see the point. I can see her work much more clearly now. She was a miniaturist of the exotic. She was a real pixie.

CD Very exotic.

MK Oh, listen, you need to read the letters. In fact, I reviewed them for The Women's Review of Books, and that was a fascinating trip--such elaborate sycophancy. It's both revolting and wonderful to see how she cozied up to all those wealthy women with jewels and scarves who were always giving her presents. How incredibly sycophantic she was in her ever so carefully phrased thank-you notes.

CD The letters of Marianne Moore?

MK The Collected Letters.

CD Just out of curiosity, you said you weren't influenced by Bishop at all, but did you read her?

MK Oh yes, I do now. In fact I'm just reading a wonderful essay on her that's in the new Hudson Review.

CD So you do enjoy her work.

MK I like her very much. I think it's a pity she wrote so little.

CD Yes, it took her such a long time to write most of her poems.

MK Well, it's one thing to be fastidious, but in a way it was a pity because there must have been a lot more poems stuck in there that never got out.

CD I know often when I write to you or talk to you, you say, "Well I'm going through the worst drought right now." You're worried about whether you'll ever write again.

MK I think I caught that disease from Howard Nemerov. After every poem he would say dolefully, "Well, that's it, I'm done, I'll never get another one."

CD But you've been so amazingly prolific, it seems to me.

MK Well thank goodness, you know, I had a little breakthrough. I do have a long dry spell every winter. And now I've got maybe fourteen new poems over the last two years, so I'm happy about that.

CD If we could return to the subject of your pastoral, private voice that's also public for a moment, I'd appreciate it since what you said earlier about the political ramifications of your private voice as a woman is very important and needs a little more clarification. I think it's perhaps been easier or more natural for women to find a nexus between their personal and political lives. This was especially true of Plath, Sexton, Rich, Levertov, and Rukeyser, to mention only a few. I don't think men writing about their private lives have been as conscious about such a nexus. There are exceptions of course. I'm thinking of Galway Kinnell's *Book of Nightmares*, W. D. Snodgrass's *Heart's Needle*, much of Robert Lowell's work following *Life Studies*, and Frank Bidart's *Sacrifice*.

MK The difference is that it's still a brave new world for women. There's still so much to retrieve that has been denied.

CD Do you see this dual role of the feminine voice continuing for some time, combining the domestic and political?

MK You're always going to see a combination of the domestic and the political in poetry by women because they are assigned the domestic role by the culture. And, after all, biologically, we bear the children and we suckle them and then they go off to war.

CD The big tent of American poetry, I'm wondering how you feel about it. I talked at the start about the crowded landscape of American poets, but didn't really follow up on this point. What do you think about the myriad voices that now appear in literary journals and books of poetry, compared, say, to your generation when it was starting out?

MK From my vantage point I think the more the merrier. I've always felt that way. There's always going to be an awful lot of bad poetry written and bad poetry published, but I think eventually it gets winnowed out.

CD So with all the stuff on the Web, along with the exponential growth of little magazines and MFA programs, who in the world is going to sort it all out?

MK The next generation.

CD That's who will worry about it, the next generation. MK If there is a next generation.

CD I went to AWP a couple years ago, not last year, and felt overwhelmed by its size.

MK No, I don't go anymore.

CD There are two full ballrooms of journal and program booths ... you've seen it.

MK Well, I stopped going about four years ago. I just can't.

CD There's a movie called "Moscow on the Hudson" with Robin Williams. I don't know if you've ever seen it.

MK Yes, now I vaguely remember.

CD It's early or mid-80s. He plays a defector from the Soviet Union at that time. And he defects in Bloomingdale's--he was a clown in a visiting circus--he makes an American friend. He's hilarious. At one point in the movie, right after he defected, he's looking down Madison Avenue, Times Square and he sees all the lights and billboards and crowds of people. He turns to his American friend and asks, "But how are you supposed to know who the poets are?" There are hundreds of American poets, voices amidst the crowd, hiding in the open, but who's listening?

MK I think we have to wait and see.

CD Okay, well, one reason I think it's so important to interview poets of your generation is to see what you and your colleagues think about what's happening now in, as you call your farm on Harriman Lane also, the "Po Biz." You're hopeful?

MK Absolutely, I'm hopeful. I think it's so healthy to see this burgeoning. And as I said, ninety-nine percent of it may turn out to be trash, but that's not for us to say.

CD Well, that's very helpful for me to hear.

MK Let me just say I have a small window through which to view the present landscape. This summer I did a weeklong workshop at Provincetown and then I came back and I did three workshops at New England College and now I'm going up to the Frost Place to do a workshop, so in a small way I get to look at what the newest would-be poets are writing now.

CD The book for which you won the Pulitzer Prize, *Up Country*, did you find writing those pastoral, persona poems in the voice of a hermit, Henry, liberating, and if so why?

MK Yes. I wrote those poems in the male voice because at that time--it was the seventies--I didn't think anyone would take a female hermit seriously.

CD I suspected that. You won the Pulitzer Prize for that book.

MK I didn't have a title for that book. And Anne had been writing the fairytale poems, and she said, "Well, I don't know. What shall I call them?" And then I said, "You can call them Transformations." And then she looked at my manuscript which was lacking a title and she said, "Well, you're always talking about going 'up country' every weekend. Call the book 'Up Country.'"

CD Was it fun to write as that hermit?

MK Oh yeah. It was fun.

CD You become a different character in some of those poems. And Henry, too, your neighbor at the time. Was he your model for your hermit?

MK Yes, he was. He was our neighbor at the foot of the hill. Of course that house crumbled and fell in almost while he was living in it, but the people who bought the property built a house on exactly that footprint.

CD It's obviously both meaningful and important for you to write repeatedly about your garden, your animals and your neighbors. In a lot of your poems you place another before you. Whether it's the horse in "Jack," or the dead dog in "Apparition," or Stanley Kunitz in "For Stanley, Some Lines at Random," you are placing others before you. In doing so you create what Malcolm Cowley called the "transpersonal self." He used this term specifically in relation to Whitman's speaker. It's a self that crosses over from the speaker of the poem to the other placed before the speaker. This is what Bishop does in "The Waiting Room" when she equates her speaker, Elizabeth, with her Aunt Consuelo. This is what poets have done forever.

MK For centuries. What fascinates me is, looking back, I remember a time when Whitman was not even in the canon.

CD And Dickinson too.

MK Dickinson too. And certainly Edna St. Vincent Millay.

CD She was another one I wanted to ask you about.

MK I knew so many of those sonnets by heart when I was fourteen.

CD I can hear her in you. Are you aware of her influence?

MK Not really, consciously. I mean the only influence I can truly point to is a dead white male, W. H. Auden, and I think I took his lines into myself by osmosis. God, those poems are just in me forever. "I sit in one of the dives on 57th street, uncertain and afraid." "Earth receive an honored guest." He was able to take this very conversational tone and write about contemporary events. And do it metaphorically. "In the nightmare of the dark / All the dogs of Europe bark."

CD In his poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," Auden talks about Yeats being hurt into poetry. Do you remember that line?

MK I do remember. "Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry."

CD How do you feel you were hurt into poetry?

MK Well, it's probably more hurt by it than hurt into it.

CD I think every poet who has written for as long as you is hurt into poetry.

MK I think poetry for me was a major liberation. I was so shaken as a 17-year-old freshman at Radcliffe when Wallace Stegner told me I should not try to write poetry, to say it with flowers instead. For years after that chastisement I didn't write and then finally, about eight years later, I started up again. But I wrote in the closet until I heard about John Holmes's poetry workshop at the Boston Center for Adult Education, and that was where it all began for me in 1957.

CD Did Stegner just think you shouldn't write because you were a woman?

MK Who knows. Maybe unconsciously that was a factor. He was only four or five years older than I was, believe it or not.

CD Stegner?

MK Yeah, he was a brand-new instructor and I was a quivering 17-year-old freshman. I don't think it had much to do with gender. I mean I'm sure what I gave him was flowery and terrible, but they were actual rhyming sonnets and he told me to say it with flowers, not to write poems about it. The "it" being romantic yearning. So that was all I needed to hear.

CD Well, in your poem "400 Meter Freestyle" you talk about picking up swimming first.

MK Becoming a serious swimmer, that was my first bursting out of the cocoon of the family. In high school I swam for the women's amateur athletic team.

CD Right, you were good.

MK I was a good distance swimmer; I was not a good sprinter. I could never get off the block fast enough.

CD At some point you must have said, "You know what? I can write. I can find the words. I can ride this wave out of here."

MK In a way I suppose that's what happened. I rode that wave out of suburban Boston, out of that constricted life in the suburbs.

CD Out of Brookline?

MK Newton. We chose it because it had a great school system but everything else about it I detested. Once I was planted here in New Hampshire my whole world turned around.

CD And not only did it turn you around, you seemed to find something you didn't know you had been looking for.

MK No, I knew I had always been looking for horses. I had longed for a horse of my own from early childhood on. I never could have more than an hour a week on a hired school horse out of a livery Stable. I was in my forties before I had my own horse.

CD No wonder you had that attachment. But just that image, the clicking of your mother's fingernails in "Life's Work" conveying her pent-up frustration at not being able to pursue a career of her own certainly evokes a powerful sense of her entrapment and frustration.

MK I have to confess it took me a very long time to appreciate her entrapment. I see her plight now. She was a captive of her time and place and she was so desperately anxious to rise from the ranks, as it were. A social position of some eminence, that was so important to her. And she had her piano.

CD That was all she could hold on to.

MK And her manicured fingernails.

CD But she was an aspiring musician.

MK At one time she was.

CD And she apparently had fallen in love with some other musician?

MK No, she simply wanted to be his accompanist and her father forbade her to travel with him.

CD I see, I didn't know if he was her lover.

MK No, he was an older man.

CD But the way this elegy ends--your mother "buried without her corset but in silk"--makes a sad commentary on not only her, but most of the women of her generation's unrealized dreams.

MK That was the figure she fought for. How far away that seems to me, that life. The hats and gloves in order to go downtown.

CD I think I hear the vet arriving. I feel we could go on talking about your work and life for many more hours.

MK I know we could, but we can't.

CD Thank you, Maxine, for talking this much.

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