PART 1 - IN HER OWN WORDS - Being Maxine Kumin

Pulitzer-winning poet laureate on her career, influences and rising up in a man's world

By MIKE PRIDE Concord Monitor columnist
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Poet Maxine Kumin is the Concord Reads writer this year. Her work will be celebrated and discussed in a series of public events beginning this month. Kumin, who is 88, won the 1973 Pulitzer Prize in poetry and later served as poet laureate of the United States.

In 2004-05, I interviewed her four times in the living room of her farm in Warner. I transcribed, compiled and condensed these interviews into an oral history in her voice.

The Kumin farm covers about 200 acres. Maxine and her husband, Victor, bought it in 1963 and moved there permanently during the mid-1970s. It is lovely rolling land that the Kumins turned into a gentleman's and gentlewoman's farm. They fenced pasture land, kept as many as seven horses and grew many of their own vegetables.

Kumin was badly injured in a horse carriage accident in 1998, but with determination and the help of her daughter she recovered to resume riding in the horse ring and swimming in the pond she and Victor had dug near the farmhouse. Although in ill health, she continues to write poetry and hopes to publish another book.

In the oral history that follows, Kumin talks about her career and her methods. She discusses her friendship with the poet Anne Sexton, the influence of the women's movement on her life and career, the poets whose work influence hers, her parents, and the sense of place that is central to her life and work.

I was a closet poet always. I didn't stop writing poetry just because Wallace Stegner told me I was a terrible poet. I went underground.

I had exempted English A at Harvard, which was a big mistake. Everybody should take it. They bucked me up to a high-level class in creative writing. It was all juniors and seniors, and I was the only freshman. I was 17 and Wallace Stegner was maybe all of 23 when I gave him a sheaf of poems. They were sonnets, all in iambic pentameter, but they were terribly sentimental and romantic. And he wrote at the top, "Say it with flowers, but for God sakes don't write any more poems about it."

After that, I was writing serious poems in the closet, but I was writing light verse for the slicks. For $3.95 I bought this book by Richard Armour called Writing Light Verse. I took it all very seriously, and by golly I started selling all over the place – Saturday Evening Post, Good Housekeeping, Ladies' Home Journal, Baby Talk, New York Herald Tribune, Christian Science Monitor, even the Wall Street Journal. I learned some things writing light verse. I learned how important closure is, and that has guided me ever since.

This was 1953 – that's when I started, just before my son Danny was born. I made a pact with myself that if I couldn't sell anything before I had had this child, I would give it all up. Well, it went swimmingly well, and I wrote a lot of light verse.

Then in 1957 I signed up for a poetry writing course at the Boston Center for Adult Education with John Holmes, who was a professor at Tufts and himself a poet but more importantly a teacher.

That's where Anne Sexton and I met. She said of me that I was the frump of frumps; I was in awe of her. She wore high heels and pancake makeup and had flowers in her hair. You could not possibly find two more different women.

That course led us to develop our own little workshop with John Holmes, Anne, George Starbuck, Sam Albert, and myself. I started to place a few poems. One was in Harper's, and the New Yorker took a long, funny poem of mine.

In 1958, John Holmes got me a job at Tufts as a part-time adjunct instructor. I was to teach freshman composition, but because I was a woman, I could teach it only to the phys ed majors and dental technicians.

On the home front, Danny was in kindergarten, and I had a neighbor who happily walked him to afternoon kindergarten and picked him up afterward and walked him back to her house, where he had milk and cookies. My neighbors were so upset that I was abandoning my children in this hideous way. I remember being told by my next-door neighbor that I was a failed mother. I might as well have been having an affair rather than commuting to Medford three afternoons a week to teach one course.

That was the atmosphere in the '50s. These were people who were hand-making Halloween costumes for their kids, who were making elaborate birthday cakes with special icings. Well, I just didn't have time for that, nor did I have the talent for it. My mother was an accomplished seamstress and fabulous knitter. I never wore a commercially made sweater until I was a married woman. I have none of those skills. My family learned to sew their own buttons on.

The other person who was hired with me at Tufts, Alberta Arthurs, went on to be the first woman dean at Harvard. We were aware, shoulder to shoulder, that we were doing something that hadn't been done. We confronted the chairman of the department and said, "Look, there's no ladies' room in this building. This is the English department building, and now you have women teaching here. We demand a ladies' room."

Right about then, I became aware that we were in a different place trying to make explicit demands. I so resented being told by male poets, "You're a good poet. You write like a man." When you drove them to the airport to catch that flight at the last minute: "You did a good job. You drove like a man." It was such a different world. The expectations were so different.

I don't know when I first became aware of the women's movement. I know I was still writing poems in a male persona all the way up into the early '70s, when I wrote the Hermit poems. They're all written in a male persona just because I didn't think the world would take a female hermit seriously. The hermit in every instance was, of course, I.

When I did become aware of the movement, my reaction was thrill, delight, a little bit of terror mixed in: What would become of us? It was yeasty time. I was afraid of a backlash. I remember when Anne published her poem "In Celebration of My Uterus," and there was that terrible review by Jim Dickey, who said he was offended, he didn't want to read about women's private parts, he didn't want to read all this intimate crap. Of course, he had published Deliverance. But that was all right – because he wrote it.

Walt Whitman was not read when I was in college in the 40s because he was a homosexual. He was not in the canon. Edna St. Vincent Millay was dismissed as just a sentimental woman. Here are some of the best Petrarchan sonnets written in the English language. And now of course she's back in the canon – not only the collected poems but the collected sonnets and two wonderful biographies about her.

I have lived long enough to see this happen. It's okay for women to write about their bodies now. It's alright to write about childbirth. There is no subject that's off-limits. I like to say I wrote my excrement poem to prove that point – that you can write about shit. It depends on how you make a poem out of it. There are some perfectly terrible poems about childbirth and uteruses, but nothing's taboo anymore.

The change has been gradual. It took a long time for women to be acknowledged as capable of writing the kinds of poetry that men traditionally were expected to write. I don't think the playing field is quite even, but it's getting there.

I was not influenced by women writing poetry. There weren't any women to admire. I could admire Marianne Moore, but I certainly couldn't write miniaturist poems like her. And I admired Elizabeth Bishop, but she was very classical and held everyone at a distance. "Mentor" was not a verb at that time. I certainly wasn't being mentored by anybody.

There were two major influences on my poetry – two dead white males. I wrote in frank imitation of Auden, who taught me more about iambic tetrameter than anyone else possibly could. Both he and Yeats taught me about combining the political and the personal. I learned from them that one could write about the political climate and make poetry from it. No one quite matches Auden's ability to combine metaphor with anguished political statement – "In the nightmare of the dark, all the dogs of Europe bark." "Sept. 1, 1939" is a magnificent poem. So is "Easter 1916" by Yeats.

The other poet I admired hugely was Karl Shapiro, whose Person, Place, and Thing had just been published in 1942. When I read those poems, they just took the top of my head off. I could not believe it. There's a poem called "University," and it begins, "To hurt the Negro and avoid the Jew is the

curriculum." Wow! That could be a poem! There was a poem called "Drug Store," a poem called "Buick" – just the topics of the poems were a revelation to me. The most commonplace and contemporary matters I suddenly saw as subjects for poems. If you've been raised on Robert Bridges or any of the Augustan poets, this has got to come as a shock.

And an odd influence was A.E. Housman – A Shropshire Lad – because they're so metrically tight, and I loved that. I've got seven or eight of them by heart, and when I was recovering from my accident, I would take this little book, and I would walk up to the horse ring – eight times around is a mile – and I would walk around reading and memorizing A.E. Housman. The thing about memorizing poetry is that it gets in the bloodstream. I say to graduate students who so resist the thought of having to memorize a poem a week: "I'm doing you a favor. I'm giving you an internal library to draw on when you're taken political prisoner." They rare back. I mean, what do they care enough about to be taken political prisoner for? It's a worthy question to be asking in a creative writing class.

Anne Sexton helped me to open up in ways that I might not have achieved on my own. I helped to formalize some of her concepts. She would read these raw drafts – I even pulled some out of the wastebasket in her study – and I'd say, "This could be a pretty good poem if you could just hammer it into form." That was pretty much my approach to the private, personal, anguished material which is now called confessional. If you could formalize it, you could make it work. Her best poems were those poems – the poems in All My Pretty Ones, her second book. She helped me get rid of the Latinate terminology in my poems. She was encouraging about my country poems – she titled Up Country. At that time you could put a second telephone line in your house if you were living in the same suburb or a contiguous one for 4 dollars and 80 cents a month, which we did. Then one of us would initiate the call and we would leave the phones connected all day and if we had something to share we would whistle into the phone. It really trains your ear to be hearing poems in process that way. We worked intimately together, and yet I think our voices are very different.

In the beginning, I didn't really want to get into this relationship with her because I knew she had been suicidal and I had just lost a friend the year before. She had had post-partum depression and had killed herself. So I was leery.

I think about Anne's suicide constantly. It's fresh. I don't think it will ever fade. I think I have finally forgiven her. I was angry, I felt bereft, betrayed. If we had had the good psychotropic drugs then that we have now, she would probably have lived a long and fruitful life, and certainly Sylvia Plath would have, too. Anne's suicide was absolutely inevitable. Nobody fought harder to stay alive than Anne. She fought those voices every day, those voices that said, "Come to us. Die." The medications that were provided then were so raw. First, she was sun-sensitive – she couldn't be outside in weather at all. And second, they made her really woolly, and she couldn't write. She turned to alcohol in those last years. She turned to whatever men she could find for companionship. There had been so many previous attempts – or mock attempts – but they were pretty serious. She would call Father Dunn and say, "I want you to give me the last rites over the telephone" – that sort of telegraphing what she was planning to do. He was a wonderful guy. He told her, "God is in your typewriter." She was constantly in search of one absolutist thing that she could cling to. She thought maybe if she became a Catholic, that would be it, but she never quite made the jump.

PART 2 - IN HER OWN WORDS - Poet Maxine Kumin on growing up and settling down

By MIKE PRIDE
Concord Monitor columnist
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I am an unregenerate atheist. There will be no afterlife. I have felt that way since I was 16 years old.

I look at this terrible world, and I feel such sorrow for where we are politically and socially. It is worse than it's ever been. I'm filled with despair, because I see holy wars taking place. Now it's going to be Christians against Muslims, Muslims against Christians, against Jews. It's so scary to see the right-wing Christian evangelicals and the right-wing Islamists – we're going to see Armageddon. We'll all be dead then, but I have kids and grandkids.

World War II was a necessary evil, and I don't think any war we have fought since then meets that criterion. I first learned about the Holocaust as a teenager. I can still see my father at the dining room table weeping, reading these letters from perhaps relatives back in Poland or people who had the same last name begging him to sponsor them. And I don't know how many he sponsored before he couldn't sponsor any more.

My father was a very moral man. He was a secret philanthropist during the Depression. He bought this broken-down old house for the postman. He did a lot of quiet things like that. But he had a lot of dicta. One thing that outraged him was when women drove from Philadelphia to New York City to shop. He thought you must spend your money where you earn it. He also said, "Early to bed and early to rise, and you never see any of the regular guys."

He encouraged intellectual achievement. He was not happy when I started swimming seriously. I swam for the Women's Athletic Association when I was in high school. I went to downtown Philadelphia to work out in the Broadmoor pool, where we had our practices. I'd come home late, and my hair would be wet. As I sat eating dinner, my hair would drip onto the tablecloth or the plate. He was appalled by that.

His thinking was: What's a nice Jewish girl like you doing thinking of a career as a swimmer? That was the summer Billy Rose established the Aquacade, and I was invited to join. I would have traveled, and we would have been chaperoned, and I would have been earning a hundred dollars a week, which was a fortune, and he forbade it.

I desperately wanted to please my father. I adored my father, and my father adored me in his way. He admired everything I did intellectually. It was thrilling that I published a book while he was still alive. My first book came out in 1961. I doubt that he read the poems, but he could hold the volume, and that was important. I had published a couple of children's books by then, and he could see that I was going to have a career as a writer. I think that was pleasing to him.

I've just written this little poem called "Immutable Laws," and it starts with all the things I learned

from my father. I remember him admonishing me, “Never buy land on a slope. It will turn out to be worthless.” We bit down hard on a derelict dairy farm on a slope. But he was an urban person; he knew nothing about the country or country land.

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My mother and I were so diametrically opposed. She was so horrified when we moved here. She had grown up in Radford, Va., a one-horse town, as she would have said, on a sort of a semi-farm, where they raised chickens. She had struggled to get away from that. They were the only Jewish family in town, although she played the organ for the Methodist church by the time she was 15. It was an ecumenical arrangement. They were well liked.

The problem for my grandfather was finding suitable Jewish husbands for his daughters. He had five daughters. They were all sent north, my mother to Philadelphia, where she attended the music conservatory. She had a gift, but of course she was never permitted to realize it. And there she met my father.

She spent her entire life being upwardly mobile in terms of everything – the people she associated with, the cultural events she attended, especially her couture. She saw her life as one of privilege in which she was cosseted. If we went shopping, she had a favorite salesperson at this store and that store, and she would say to me as an aside, “Isn’t it terrible the way she has to work for a living?” I think she would have been so bewildered by the women’s movement. It just was so foreign to her way of thought.

And here she has a daughter who’s sitting here in sweat pants. That was how different we were. I fought hard to become an individual and to break away from that. It was only at the end of her life that she softened and accepted our way of life. She went down to the barn with me and spoke about the horses of her childhood.

We had a succession of dogs when I was a child. When I was about 8 or 9, I had my first real contact with horses. I began to take a riding lesson every week for a dollar. I just fell in love with horses. I was 40 before I had horses of my own, but I knew that was where I was going somehow.

I feel totally accepting of my horses, and they totally accept me. I’m interested in whatever communication we are able to make – nonverbal communication with animals. Recently I went to see my grand-foal in Henniker. It’s Deuter’s sister’s baby, and I had Deuter’s mother – she was a horse we rescued. So that was the third generation, a beautiful little colt – boy, is he handsome. I felt some small bond there when he saw his mother, Eden. I hadn’t seen her since she was 7 or 8.

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I remember so well the first time Victor and I saw this farm in November of 1962. We had honeymooned not far from here, up in East Andover. We had each inherited $5,000 from a grandparent and decided to look for a place around here that we could use as a camp. A Realtor showed us exactly three places, and the third one was this.

The minute we started up the hill, I got goose bumps. I knew that whatever was at the top, that was what I wanted. The roof was wrecked, and the farmhouse was full of dead animals, and the back half of the barn had fallen down. It had once been an old dairy farm. It had been empty for six or eight years.

A young artist and his wife had tried to bring it back. He was trying to make an artist's studio out of the barn. He left a lot of really dreary oil paintings behind. And it was for sale for a song. I think they were asking for $13,000, and we bought it for $11,500. We were almost within our budget.

From the start, I knew this was it, but I don't know why I knew it. I loved the isolation. I loved that it was at the top of a dead-end dirt road. It was everything that living in suburbia was not. I knew somehow that I wanted a place that would be like a little island on top of a hill. It was not the most practical thing. We could afford it, so we bought it.

We did have to put a new roof on it pretty darn quick. There was an old Sears Roebuck pump that sort of provided water. It often kicked out, and you had to go down and you had to know where to tap it to get it to go back on again. The place did have plumbing and electricity. It also had blackberry briars so dense that you had to part them to see into the windows. It was totally overgrown. There was no cleared land.

I was looking for peace and quiet. I was looking to have a relationship with the land – we did have a little handkerchief back yard in Newton, and I did have a petunia plant and a tomato plant, and we did have a lovely maple tree. But to come up here and see huge trees – of course, it wasn't green in November, but you could just see the potential.

At first it was just a place to get away, a weekend place, vacation place – a week in the spring, Thanksgiving up here. Then it became seductive, and I kept coming up earlier and staying later, and I started a garden. Pretty soon we had a couple of horses and foals for the summer. We took riding lessons, and our daughter Judith got more and more involved. Pretty soon, Judith was spending every spare moment over at the animals. She got into horses, and I was re-infected.

When we first moved here, everything outside was strange and wonderful. The first porcupine quill – I had never seen a porcupine quill. I had never seen wild berries that you could just go pick and eat. And wild mushrooms – that was an enchantment. Everything was an enchantment, but it was also an awful lot of back-breaking labor.

The first thing we built was this paddock so that we could accommodate the rented horses. Rudy Ingold was our neighbor then, a wonderful neighbor. We had a back trail that would wind from the top of this hill all the way through their property and come out just about on their front lawn. Rudy came up while we were building it. Ted Young was helping Victor. They were using from the old railroad. The bars were probably 6-foot high, and Rudy said, "My God, what are you gonna keep in there? Elephants?"

That was our approach. We were so terrified that we'd do something wrong and a horse would get loose.

So that was the beginning, and then we added pasture after pasture after pasture. That first summer, we had the pond dug. A wonderful guy from Belmont came and dug every day. It was his idea not to take out that big rock out there, to leave it. It was real deep out in front of it, and it would be safe to dive.

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Once we were established here, and I was examining everything about me so closely, I had more subject matter, so I was writing more intimately about what I saw and what I felt. And little by little the language that I used changed. It became less academic and less Latinate and more muscular.

People see something and say all the time, “Now that’s a poem!” I never see it that way. That’s not how I get my poems. What I’ve experienced may make its way into my poems, but it’s not what generates a poem. I take what comes. I don’t prepare for a poem. Something seeks me out, and then I check it out, and then I work on it. Then I set it aside and come back to it and redo it.

Poems always start with some kind of inchoate sensation or line or image or rhythm. I follow it blindly. And lots of times they don’t work out. Those are just still births. I’m not like Edgar Allan Poe, able to plot out the whole poem.

I’ve reached an age where I think about death a lot. Mortality is much more of a topic in my poems. But all my memories of this farm are sustaining. The sense of place here is so important to me. I can’t see myself ever anywhere else, and I’m hanging on to it as tightly as I can.
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