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Erin Rogers

## THE ART OF LIVING

In her first poetry collection since a near-fatal accident, Maxine Kumin celebrates the forms that life and writing take

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Maxine Kumin established herself as a poet by writing in a straightforward, direct style about her active life, which included swimming and horseback riding, raising children and horses, dogs, and sheep. In 1999, however, at the age of seventy-four, her life dramatically changed when she was nearly killed in a horse-driving accident. This past November, following a difficult recovery, Kumin published *The Long Marriage*, her first book of poetry since the accident.

The poems in *The Long Marriage* draw from Kumin's close relationship with the natural world on her family's farm, her overcoming of her physical injuries, and her feelings about her friend, the poet Anne Sexton, who committed suicide in 1974. (Kumin was the last to have spent time with her, chatting about poetry over a lunch of tuna-fish sandwiches and vodka, and Sexton's death still haunts Kumin's work; references to it are found in *The Long Marriage*'s "Three Dreams after a Suicide," "The Ancient Lady Poets," and "Oblivion.")

The youngest of four children born to a Jewish pawnbroker and his wife, Maxine Kumin studied history and literature at Radcliffe, where, in 1945, she met Victor Kumin, a Harvard graduate on furlough from the Army. The pair married a year later. Poetry was not an important part of Kumin's life until 1957, when she enrolled in a poetry workshop offered by the Boston Center for Adult Education. The workshop's instructor, John Holmes, soon realized there were two major talents in the workshop: Kumin and classmate Anne Sexton, who was, like Kumin, married with children and living in suburban Boston. Kumin and Sexton began commuting to class together and became inseparable. With Sexton's support, along with that of Holmes and other members of the workshop, Kumin began to take her poetry seriously and to garner public acclaim for her work. Her first collection of poems, *Halfway*, was published in 1961. Since then she has gone on to publish fourteen books of poetry, five novels, five books of essays and memoirs, and twenty children's books, several in collaboration with Anne Sexton. *Up Country*, a book of her poetry published in 1972, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

In 1963 Kumin and her husband bought a 200-acre farm in New Hampshire, where they and their three children eventually moved permanently to grow vegetables and raise Arabian and Standardbred horses. Horses were at first just a hobby of one of Kumin's daughters, but they became Kumin's own obsession after moving to the farm. Always an athlete (Kumin swam competitively in college), she took up distance riding and then, when arthritis hindered her ability to ride for long periods of time, driving horses. The accident, which happened at a driving clinic, left her with a broken neck, eleven broken ribs, considerable internal bleeding, a punctured lung, and a bruised kidney and liver. "Ninety-five percent of people with your fracture never make it to the emergency room," her physician told her. "Ninety-five percent of the ones who do [survive], end up as quadriplegics." From her struggle to pull through the ordeal and the rigorous therapy it involved came Kumin's memoir, *Inside the Halo and Beyond: The Anatomy of a Recovery* (2000).

Now, with *The Long Marriage*, Kumin offers a testament to survival, a collection of poetry that, in an unwavering voice and with vivid descriptions, calls out: I'm still here, and I'm glad to be alive.

She spoke with me recently by telephone from her farm in New Hampshire.

—Erin Rogers

**Megan Harlan of *The New York Times* interpreted the title of *The Long Marriage* as a reference not only to your relationship with your husband but also to your relationship with your "New Hampshire horse farm, with numerous social and political causes, with poetry itself and, most fundamentally, with [your] own body." Is this what you had in mind? Did she leave anything out?**

I thought she was incredibly perspicacious to pick up on all that, quite frankly. I don't know that I consciously intended the title to reach beyond the actual marriage and marriage to place, but I think everything she said was right on.

**Harlan also comments on your "apparent allergy to flowery language." I was interested to read in *Always Beginning*, your latest book of essays, that Wallace Stegner, your writing instructor at Radcliffe, told you to "Say it with flowers but for God's sake don't write poems about it." Did his comment have anything to do with the direct style that you developed over the years?**

That just simply turned me off of poetry. I didn't write another poem for years and years and years. I was seventeen. I had led a comparatively sheltered life, at least intellectually, and I was not at all prepared for this. I had no comprehension of the fact that I was writing flowery, romantic sonnets. I thought the fact that they were metered and rhymed was pretty good. The one thing I learned from that was never, ever do that to a young student, because you simply cannot predict what somebody who is seventeen or eighteen years old is going to be like in five years. And then of course I forgive him because I think he was only four or five years older than I was.

**Are you glad that you began so steeped in rhyme and meter?**

I think so, yes. I was very fortunate to have what I guess is now referred to as a classical education. It was the Columbia eight-year study plan, which was very innovative back then. I had the same Latin teacher and the same English teacher from ninth grade straight through, and they were both wonderful. They were dedicated teachers of the old style. I just think I got a terrific start.

The thing that's depressing is teaching graduate students today and discovering that they don't know simple elemental facts of grammar. They really do not know how to scan a line; they've never been taught to scan a line. Many of them don't know the difference between lie and lay, let alone its and it's. And they're in graduate school! So I get very upset about that, although I realize that I'm taking an embattled position.

**Have you found your study of Latin helpful in your work as a writer?**

I think the background in Latin has been immensely useful to me over the long haul. I started Latin in eighth grade and by the time I was a senior in high school I'd already done the standard curriculum—

right up through Virgil, which is the name of the dog lying at my feet this moment. I had a year translating Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and that was just sheer heaven for me. I loved it.

**The *Long Marriage* opens with the sensual "Skinnydipping with William Wordsworth" and is followed by six poems celebrating Rilke, Gorki, Marianne Moore, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Muriel Rukeyser, and Carolyn Kizer. What was it that drew you to write about other writers in these poems?**

It just kind of happened. It wasn't part of a game plan at all. I pretty much wrote them in the order in which they are arranged in the book. Actually, I think the first one I wrote was probably the Gorki one and then the "Skinnydipping"... and then the others just sort of came, here and there; they weren't written sequentially. Often you don't know what you've got in terms of a book until you start shaping the forty or forty-five poems that you have, and then you see what kind of grouping they fall into.

**I want to ask you about the poem "Pantoum, with Swan." It evokes the image of Leda and the Swan, and it ends "I had his knowledge, I had no power/the year I taught Yeats in a classroom so pale/ that a mist enshrouded the ancient religions/ and bits of his down flew from under my fingernails." This speaks to me, in part, about what it means to be a woman in academics or simply a woman in a man's world. Is that what you were trying to convey?**

Well, that's part of it, certainly. For many years I've taught Yeats' sonnet "Leda and the Swan," and have been struck over and over again with what a terribly sexist poem it is (though enshrined in the canon). And then, I felt harassed teaching a seminar in prosody—teaching form—at the graduate school level to unwilling, even surly students who were only taking it because they needed the credit. They would say things like, "Form is just a crutch. Who needs form?" Meanwhile, I'm assigning everyone to write a sestina, and everyone has to write a villanelle, and so on. When we came to the pantoum I just sort of decided, "Well, I'm going to write a pantoum, too. I'm so sick of the way these people are responding." And so it was a "get even" poem, initially. But I love to work in form. I think the challenges of form elicit extraordinary responses. You don't know what's going to come. And that was certainly the case with this poem. Remember in the Yeats version it says, "Did she put on his knowledge with his power?" That to me was one of the more offensive lines. That's why mine says, "I had his knowledge but Bird had the power." Of course, I was thrilled to be able to complete the pantoum by having the last line refer back to the first line, which is what a pantoum wants to do. But it's usually one of the harder things to achieve. And I took a lot of liberties with the form. I didn't repeat entire lines. I repeated tag ends of lines, and in some cases I repeated just the concept.

**Have you written anything in response to 9-11?**

I have written one poem that refers to catastrophes in general—the Towers is just one of them. There are two ways of looking at it; I think it was the German philosopher Theodor Adorno who said, "After Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric." That's the line that my poem starts with. So there's that response, and then there's the other response that says you can't stop living, and you can't stop having art if you've got to go on living.

**In *Always Beginning: Essays of a Life in Poetry* (2000) you have a conversation with the poet Enid Shomer about the dangers of driving horses. Although the book was published after your near-fatal horse-driving accident in 1999, the interview must have taken place before it happened.**

Yes, well before.

**When Shomer asked if you were attracted by the danger of driving, you said, "It may help." Did you ever worry that you would actually have a serious accident? In retrospect, do you feel as if you might have been tempting fate?**

If you ask my grown children that question, they'll tell you absolutely, yes, because I had this awful sanctimonious thing I said over and over: "Well, at least you'll be able to say Mother died doing something she loved." It is a very dangerous sport. You don't have anywhere near the control you have when riding a horse—you have nothing, really. You have your voice and your hands. So when a horse spooks... This was not a green horse—this is a horse I had driven literally a thousand miles. We were very familiar with each other. We read each other very well. But when he lost it, he totally lost it.

**I was very compelled by the way you wrote about your horse Deuter, the way your love for him comes through in your reconciliation with him in *Inside the Halo and Beyond*.**

Well, Deuter tried. He swerved to avoid stepping on me, so instead he pulled the cart across my body. It's awful, looking back on it, but I'm so lucky—I'm lucky to be alive, I'm lucky to have gotten almost everything back. I do have some nerve damage, and my body hurts all the time, but that doesn't keep me down.

**Judith Barrington of *The Woman's Review* called *Inside the Halo* "ultimately . . . a book about courage." It struck me, though, that there was also a strong undercurrent of frustration with your being so dependent upon loved ones. What was the book ultimately about for you?**

I don't really have an answer for that. None of that was intentional; I didn't see it as a book about courage, I saw it simply as a memoir of a terrible accident and how I came out of it. And, of course, I've improved a lot since the end of that book. It took me at least a year to get back everything that was going to come back. The book only represents possibly seven or eight months. I was very pleased with that review; I thought it was a very kind review.

**"Grand Canyon" is the only poem that directly addresses your personal recovery. Is it too difficult to write about in poetry?**

Some of the poems that came out of that experience, like "Grady" and "The Woman Who Moans" and "Wagons," are peripheral, but they're pretty intimate, too. I don't think I've ever felt terribly comfortable writing about my body. First of all, I think I took my body for granted for so many years. I abused it a lot. We (my husband Victor and I) were endurance riders, and I was a swimmer before that. We've always been immensely athletic, and it's very hard to feel betrayed by your body. So, I am still coming to terms with that, but I'm not sure if I'm going to write any more poems about it.

**In "Making the Jam Without You," a poem for your daughter Judith, (*The Nightmare Factory*, 1970), you say, "It was not clear who did the mothering."**

It's still not clear.

**It seems this would be especially poignant now because she played such an important role in taking care of you after the accident.**

Yes, it's murkier and murkier. Well, I'm so blessed to have kids who care. I just feel extremely fortunate. My son lives twenty-seven miles away. A day never passes that he doesn't call. He has a big unruly dog that we call "the dog from Hell" and he comes over frequently. We walk and the dogs romp. But Dan's been absolutely wonderful. He's a great source of help for me, because he's my computer. I'm constantly getting into trouble on the computer, but since he's a freelance writer he's almost always available.

**In your essay "Long Road to an Upland Farm," you write about your family's gradual move from suburban Boston to a farm in central New Hampshire. You write, "the farm was a magnet; it held me fast," and that family members joke about how hard it is to get you off the 200-acre property. How do you think your work would be different if you were still a suburbanite?**

I think it would be worlds different. The countryside and the farm itself are so important to me; I can't even visualize being a poet without living here, even though I was a poet before. I can't really project myself into that other life.

**Most people find it difficult not to be angry when friends commit suicide, and yet in your foreword to *The Complete Poems of Anne Sexton* (1981, 1999) you seem to have understood Sexton's decision to take her life. Was that only after you processed the anger?**

No, I felt that way long before she succeeded. There were so many mock attempts, or half-hearted attempts. And she was going downhill; it was so obvious to absolutely everyone that she was in such torment. I felt she was absolutely entitled. And we all knew it was going to happen; it was just a question of when.

**You've said that poetry kept her alive.**

Yes, I think it did.

**Did you feel that way as well, after your accident—that poetry kept you alive?**

No. I think it was writing in general. It was thinking of myself as a writer, respecting myself as a writer that kept me going. And there again I have to credit Judith because it was she who brought her laptop to the hospital and said, "you talk and I'll type."