

The Boston Globe

'The Pawnbroker's Daughter: A Memoir,' by Maxine Kumin

By Michael Andor Brodeur
The Boston Globe July 18, 2015

It's a good feeling to have a new book with Maxine Kumin's name on it in your hands. Kumin, who died in February of 2014, is one of those poets whose passing echoes profoundly through her lines. Usually it's just the poem we bring back to life by reading, but when a poet is so present in each word, turn, and notch, as Kumin was, it's as though our breath could bring her back for a moment, too.

"The Pawnbroker's Daughter" is not a posthumous volume of poems (though she draws from her work throughout), but a loose and lucid memoir that charts Kumin's path from a middle-class Jewish kid in Philadelphia to a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet laureate, feminist icon, and, perhaps most significantly, flatlander turned New England farmer.

Kumin splits her story into five short essays, four of which previously appeared between 2012 and 2014 in *The American Scholar* and *The Georgia Review*, and each of which gives greater depth of field to the glimpses of her life offered by her poems, from the ginkgo in her mother's garden (mentioned in 1962's "The Spell") to the "outstretched wings/ of hemlocks heavily snowed upon" she loved aloud in later poems like "Cross Country Skiing."

The first chapter finds the young Maxine Winokur (named after her grandfather) navigating the expectations of faith and family as a young girl in Philly, her father helming his Federal Loan pawnshop, and her mother ever "about to depart in a cloud of French perfume for an important social event" — a home life we've had glimpses of before in poems like 1985's "Spree."

But while these early remembrances — right up to her enrollment at Radcliffe, where her "life began anew" and her "parochial Jewishness fell away" — do fill in some biographical blanks, the book's most revealing moments begin within the love letters sent between Maxine and future husband Victor, a US Army sergeant stowed away at Los Alamos as one of the soldier-scientists developing the atomic bomb (a post that would land both him and Maxine on FBI watch lists). Kumin pulls passages from a stash of 575 letters, and through them we see a lifelong love — and a burgeoning talent — in bloom.

Kumin's first volume of poetry, "Halfway," didn't arrive until 1961, and there's a rich period of self-discovery she plumbs between the first four lines of light verse she landed in the *Christian Science Monitor* in 1953 (on the deceptive lusciousness of catalog tomatoes), and her later excoriations of more profound injustices, which find her "a helpless citizen of a country/ I used to love."

In this time we get to see her first workshops at the Boston Center for Adult Education in John Holmes's class, where her 17-year friendship with Anne Sexton began. And we get to see the suburban

domesticity of life in Newton begin to wear on her, as she toggled between roles as poet and parent. One letter to her mother reads, in part: “Start children’s dinner. Retrieve child and cello from lesson. Poets from workshop call, farewell party for John Holmes Friday night? Bake cake? Tomorrow.” It’s a Kumin we never hear in the poems she eventually arrived at, where the sprawling ponds and paddocks of PoBiz Farms allowed her space to breathe — and peace to write.

Kumin’s poems have long dug into the fertile turf of her farm life, and here we see her foraging for fiddleheads and chanterelles, foaling mares, and minding the local population of frogs, woodchucks, and porcupines. Old Harriman Place (the original name of the rural New Hampshire property) “lodged deeper and deeper into our psyches,” she writes. So, too, can it help inform how we experience Kumin’s poetry.

Watching her reawaken the history of the old white farmhouse, with its saggy barn and shaggy acres, feels not unlike reading her poems — making them new just by occupying them, for however long. The longer you stay, the richer they grow, something Kumin saw coming in a poem from 1986 called “A Calling”: “Poetry is like farming. It’s/ a calling, it needs constancy,/ the deep woods drumming of the grouse,/ and long life.”