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'And Short the Season' by Maxine Kumin

Michael Andor Brodeur
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(This article begins with a review of 'Elise Cowen' edited by Tony Trigilio)

While Cowen was furtively filling her notebook, a young Maxine Kumin was sprouting up in the pages of Poetry, at that time mourning her "One Dead Friend": "Now you are ash and chips of bone/ and your maimed wife lies down alone/ and there is only left to curse/ the random clock of the universe."

It would be misleading to say that Kumin, who passed in February at 88, ever happened upon a gentler path into that good night while walking her New Hampshire farmland. But time did cool her fury toward death somewhat, providing fertile ground for years of poems — and far less cursing of the universe.

In her final collection, "And Short the Season," Kumin is as graceful and unsparing as ever, tenderly lamenting our violations against nature and each other. Across five sections, Kumin dips in and out of forms — sometimes they seem like a way to sustain composure against the outside world's absurdity.

After 50 years, though, the cruelties of both life and death have softened each other's signals in Kumin's poems. Time is passing, and her vision is failing, but even when death storms her garden, she finds beauty: "The onions rotted, the carrots were raddled/ with root maggots, the purple pole beans collapsed."

Along the way Kumin gives glimpses of her process — chasing words to their origins, squabbling with spell-check — as well as a reflection on her own place in poetic history through a series of "Sonnets Uncorseted," which trace a lineage of female writers from Margaret Cavendish to Virginia Woolf to Anne Sexton and Carolyn Kizer and Kumin and forward.

She tangles with pollution, politics, war, and abuse; her mind nimbly darting from sweeping panoramas to tiny details throughout, like one of the birds she watches. As bad as things get, ours is never a world she seems eager to leave.

One of Kumin's best aspects as a poet was her regard for words, which she held as precious as any other living thing. She forages for them — regolith, mycorrhizal, eohippus — wasting not, wanting not, finding context in compost. "Saving is a form of worship," she writes in "The Path, The Chair." It's an attitude toward life that changes death from an end to a beginning. And in her last poem, "Allow Me," it prepares her for an exit she can live with: "Sudden and quiet, surrounded by friends/ — John Milton's way —/ But who gets to choose this ordered end/ Trim and untattered, loved ones at hand?/ — Allow me that day.