

Metamorphosis: From Light Verse to the Poetry of Witness

by Maxine Kumin

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How did I become a very old poet, and a polemicist at that? In the *Writers Chronicle* of December 2010 I described myself as largely self-educated. In an era before creative writing classes became a staple of the college curriculum, I was "piecemeal poetry literate"—in love with Gerard Manley Hopkins and A. E. Housman, an omnivorous reader across the centuries of John Donne and George Herbert, Randall Jarrell and T. S. Eliot. I wrote at least a hundred lugubrious romantic poems. One, I remember, began

When lonely on an August night I lie
Wide-eyed beneath the mysteries of space
And watch unnumbered pricks of dew-starred sky
Drop past the earth with quiet grace ...

Deep down I longed to be one of the tribe but I had no sense of how to go about gaining entry. I had already achieved fame in the narrow confines of my family for little ditties celebrating birthdays and other occasions, but I did not find this satisfying. There were no MFAs in poetry that I knew of except for the famous Iowa Writers' Workshop, founded in 1936; certainly there was nothing accessible to a mother of two, pregnant with her third child in 1953 in Newton, Massachusetts. I have noted elsewhere that I chafed against the domesticity in which I found myself. I had a good marriage and our two little girls were joyous elements in it. But my discontent was palpable; I did not yet know that a quiet revolution in thinking was taking place. Of course motherhood was not enough. Perhaps I could become a literary critic?

Hoping to find direction, I subscribed to the *Writer*, a Boston magazine. There I found my destiny in an advertisement for Richard Armour's *Writing Light Verse*, \$3.95. I would begin there and if I hadn't published anything by the time this baby was born, I would turn my back on the Muse forever. My first ever four-liner appeared in the *Christian Science Monitor* in March of that year. When the check for five dollars came, I had recovered my investment in Armour's book, and had broken into print with this:

There never blows so red the rose,
So sound the round tomato
As March's catalogues disclose
And yearly I fall prey to.

I had been ghostwriting articles for some local doctors on subjects ranging from the benefits of electroshock to the treatment of third-degree burns, spending Saturdays at a medical library in Boston while my husband took over my domestic role. Now I had found a profession that was infinitely portable. I could tryout lines in my head while doing the dishes or hanging the laundry—no dishwasher, no dryer—or conveying a child to a music lesson or the dentist. I grew adept at composing poems in the car while I waited for the musician or patient to be trained or treated. Here is one I've dredged up from my memory bank:

People who sleep like a baby
Don't mean what they say. Or maybe
They have no scions who wake
At midnight with ill-defined ache.
Nor have they at 2 yet another
child bringing her nightmare to Mother.
No indeed. If they had, they would gather
That this simile is mere blather.
As for me, I am happy to own up
I would much rather sleep like a grown-up.

Before long, I was being published in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Herald Tribune*, and I was frequently appearing in the *Christian Science Monitor*. I also won acceptance in the *Ladies' Home Journal* and the *Saturday Evening Post*, among the leading magazines of the time. "Lines on a Half-Painted House" appeared in the *Post* in 1955:

In summer, beach and billows beckon;
And in between, you dab a speck on.

In autumn, who feels dutiful?
The foliage is beautiful.

In winter, little can be done;
The brush will freeze, the nose will run.

Spring's the time! The perfect instant!
And fortunately, two months distant.

About these lines I must add this incredible detail: my husband was required to provide a letter from his employer certifying that my poem was original. This is not as far-fetched as it sounds today. In the fifties, women, along with people of color, were still thought to be intellectually inferior, mere appendages in the world of belles lettres.

Writing light verse actually served me well as a poet. It pressed me into the exactitude of rhyme, and working in rhyme allowed me to trot some of my dark poems out of the closet and try to cast them in formal patterns. I greatly admired Edna St. Vincent Millay's sonnets, especially her skillful Petrarchan ones, all but unmatched to this day; W. H. Auden's deft tetrameter also pointed me forward.

I continued to write in isolation until 1957, when I stumbled upon a poetry workshop at the Boston Center for Adult Education conducted by the poet and Tufts University professor John Holmes. Anne Sexton and I met in that class; our deep personal and professional relationship ensued and ran for seventeen years until she took her own life. Holmes became my mentor, and in private I called him my Christian academic daddy. He proposed me for membership in the New England Poetry Club and soon thereafter put me up for my first academic position at his university.

Still, entry into this circle of emerging poets only highlighted the tension I felt at having to juggle domestic and professional spheres. This acrobatic act dominates a letter I wrote to my mother in 1958

to wish her a belated happy birthday:

Just call me Mrs. Pepys. Up sooner than betimes; dryer broken, youngest out of underpants. All underpants soaking wet on line. Pouring. Ten minutes of earnest persuasion, no one would know he was wearing old baby pair, no one would see. Find plastic bag to protect violin case. (Pouring harder.) Write check for violin teacher. Overdrawn? Live dangerously; payday Wednesday. Find cough drops for middle child. Middle child coughs anyhow. Girls depart. Youngest watching Captain Kangaroo. Make beds, do dishes, get dressed; car pool late for youngest, writer late for appointment. Car pool comes, writer leaves; rushes to Tufts. Interview with chairman of English Department, 30 minutes. Consults my resume. What was Slavic course you took junior year? Think back; possibly 19th century Russian history. Discuss elements of English renaissance? Writer knows little about this period. Bluff. Next meet chairman, Freshman English. Amiable. Each have a cigarette. Back to chair of department. Accompany him across campus (still pouring) to meet Dean. Dean looks too young to shave. Has five children. Further discussion. Money not mentioned. Interview over. Decision after June 16. Arrive home, gobble sandwich, deliver girls back to school. Go pick up youngest, rush to bank for cash. Overdrawn? Live dangerously. At bank, youngest's stomach feels squirmy. Suspicious green tint to complexion. Throw up? Abandon plan to go to market. Rush home. No temperature. Does not throw up. Borrow neighbor in case; go to market. Husband's sales director coming for dinner. Husband has clean shirt? Whiskey sours? No rye. Can't find noodle pudding recipe. Find it. Make pudding. Girl Scout cookout postponed, rain. Stops raining. Clean chicken, set table. Middle child comes home. Cello case? Lost. Found. Deliver middle child and cello to lesson. Home. Toss salad. Start children's dinner. Retrieve child and cello from lesson. Poets from workshop call, farewell party for John Holmes Friday night? Bake cake? Tomorrow. Find children for early supper. Throw on dress; husband and sales director arrive. Drinks. Dinner. Children to bed. Guest leaves and so betimes to bed.

I remember that life well. I was just beginning to get my "true" poems published, first in little magazines like *Audience* and the *Beloit Poetry Journal*, then acceptances from the *Atlantic*, *Harpers*, even the *New Yorker*. I remember teaching freshman comp part-time to phys-ed majors and dental technicians; I was the first woman ever hired in the Tufts University English department and therefore not to be trusted with liberal arts students.

Coming of age as a poet in the late 1950s and well into the '60s, I was not unconscious of the disdain with which aspiring women poets—and people of color—were treated. Gradually I came to realize how arduous the road to acceptance as a woman artist would be. Attitudes changed at a glacial pace. I have cited elsewhere, more than once, an event that took place in 1967. At a dinner hosted by the Poetry Society of America, Robert Lowell rose to praise Marianne Moore as the nation's best woman poet. Blessedly, Langston Hughes leapt up to assert that she was the best Negro woman poet in the country. What astonishes me is how few women today, hearing this story, appreciate the irony in it. Was she black? they ask.

In 1961, when my first book appeared, it was one of forty-odd poetry collections published in the United States that year. Just eight were by women. (That statistic and the following ones are provided

by Wikipedia.) By 2011, the major trade publishers, independent presses, university presses, online publishers, even self-publish presses, had engorged that number and Wikipedia no longer listed them all, instead posting only the eighty-some poets chosen for David Lehman's annual *Best American Poetry* anthology. By my rough count, thirty-plus were women. This year (2012), Bill Henderson's Pushcart anthology processed approximately eight thousand poems that had been nominated for a prize by contributing editors and assorted journals. It seems safe to say that poetry, in all its permutations from rap lyrics to sonnets redoublés, is flourishing.

Holding one's first published collection of poems is matched only by the thrill of holding one's newborn child for the first time. I could hardly believe my good fortune. In 1961, the same year that *Halfway* came out, the Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study announced the recipients of its largess. Incredibly, both Anne Sexton and I were among the twenty-four women who received grants in fields ranging from poetry and painting to science, history, and philosophy. Although the dollar amounts were small, the grants authenticated us. They said we were real and what we did was valuable.

The Radcliffe Institute's validation freed me to see myself as a writer. Although poetry was my first and remains my most enduring love, I wrote extensively in other genres. I never felt any ambivalence about working in prose; in a comforting way it relieved the tension of the high-wire act of writing the poem. When my children were small I turned to writing stories for them, many in tight rhyme. Richard Wilbur, Jarrell, and Eliot had sanctified this terrain before me, and I found it joyful and relaxing. Now, only a handful of my twenty-five children's books remain in print; all five novels, my memoir, and my one collection of short stories are out of print; as far as I can tell, my four essay collections are still available.

In the mid-sixties, John Ciardi, director of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference in Middlebury, Vermont, offered me a coveted position as a fellow. I declined, citing some bogus reason; the truth was I was too scared to accept. The prospect of rubbing elbows with a faculty of prominent writers paralyzed me. Luckily, Ciardi persevered. In 1969, when he invited me to join the Bread Loaf staff, I screwed up my courage and agreed. The experience was exhilarating, the atmosphere relaxed and friendly. I went back five more times.

When my fourth poetry book, *Up Country: Poems of New England*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1973, I was stunned. The news came in a phone call from a local television station; I was certain someone was perpetrating a cruel hoax. Once I was persuaded the award was real, I was aghast. Harper & Row were, too. In six weeks they managed to renew the print run and bring out a paperback edition as well. However, when my editor, accompanying me to my first reading at the 92nd Street Y in New York, announced cheerfully, "This should be fun. I've never been to a poetry reading before," I was so unsettled that I misplaced the carefully annotated list of poems I planned to read and had to choose as I went along.

That summer after the flurry of interviews, including appearances on TV, I fled from suburban Boston to our derelict former dairy farm in New Hampshire. Candide's advice to cultivate my garden helped center me. I was truly afraid I would never write again—but the poems came, as they always had, on their own terms, beginning in the most unexpected ways and demanding that I pay attention. What was also unexpected was the flow of invitations to give readings and teach at a wide array of colleges and universities. Before the Pulitzer, the only major invitation I had received was thanks to Howard

Nemerov, who had recommended me to Centre College as visiting professor. Danville, Kentucky, was a venue more exotic than Paris or Rome would have been. After the Pulitzer, I was an adjunct professor at Columbia. Next came two Fannie Hurst Professorships in succession at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, and Washington University in St. Louis.

The following year we sold our snug little Cape Cod colonial in Newton and moved to New Hampshire full time. To my surprise and frequent consternation, I was launched in the poetry business; Pobiz Farm became the name of the craggy, hilly, overgrown property we were bent on restoring, and where we had started to raise horses. I was a wage-earning poet and an amateur distance rider. Often, flying to gigs in faraway states, I took my lightweight synthetic saddle with me in its own case. When someone next to me at the baggage claim asked, "What's in there?" I replied, "A tuba." En route to various outposts in California or Missouri my seatmate invariably asked me, "What do you do?" I never said that I was a poet because experience had taught me the rejoinder would be, "That so? Ever published anything?" I learned to say, "We raise horses," which was true and ate up much of my income.

Poetry and horses, with long days of labor (some of it hired but mostly our own) to reclaim cow pastures from the second-growth forest, dig postholes and put up wooden fences, sand and repair or replace ancient clapboards. Along with the sprucing up, the books of poems accrued, a new one every three to four years. I left Harper & Row for Viking in 1975—who needed an editor who had never been to a poetry reading?—and then left Viking after the decision was made in 1989 to use the photo of a glossy Bambi-like fawn on the cover of *Nurture* instead of what I had lobbied for: a tiny kangaroo joey held against the immense scale of a human hand.

W. W. Norton became my publisher and Carol Houck Smith my editor. We did eight books together, one of them a collection of essays and stories, and each graced by a Wolf Kahn painting. I remember with particular fondness the afternoon we spent with a manuscript spread out on the double bed of my cramped room in the old Gramercy Park Hotel as we bumped our way around deciding which poems went with which others. Then Carol said, "Shall we go see Wolfie?" and we made our way several blocks uptown to the gallery and chose one of his glorious landscapes. Once I had been a suburban matron. Now I had lived so long in the country that I was skittish walking in the rush-hour crowds of pedestrians and crossing streets where impatient taxi drivers honked and gestured. Diminutive Carol asked, "Would you like me to hold your hand?" Looking down at her, I said, "Yes, please:'

I was never comfortable in New York City; the canyons between skyscrapers felt ominous. By contrast, Washington, DC, with its height limit on buildings, seemed airier, greener, less hectic. As the newly appointed 1981-82 Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress (a position renamed Poet Laureate four years later), I was able to select several women poets to read in a monthly series. Best known among them was Adrienne Rich, who had rejected previous requests from male laureates; that day, the line for admittance to the auditorium stretched around the block. I also instituted weekly brown bag lunches in the august Poetry Room, little used except for formally welcoming foreign poets. If my tenure is to be remembered for anything, let it be for those Thursday lunches where well-known writers brought their students or disciples for a noon gathering that often stretched to 4:00 PM.

In 1995 I was appointed a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets alongside Carolyn Kizer. Together we lobbied for the appointment of the black poet Lucille Clifton to fill vacant posts, but twice

we saw these positions go to white males. In November of 1998 we resigned in protest, which ultimately led to the restructuring of the board: no longer could chancellors serve two consecutive twelve-year terms, and women and minorities achieved representation. We were praised by many and damned by a procrustean few.

Over the years many of my poems were rooted in the rural landscape; this led to my receiving the jocular epithet Roberta Frost. I didn't disavow this, but I did feel that it marginalized my work. Still, when Denise Levertov, a poet I admired for her lyric voice, began to write fierce poems against the escalating involvement of American troops in Vietnam, I had worried that her polemic would somehow damage her extraordinary gift. (It did not.)

Looking back, I see that as early as 1972 I confronted ethical issues in my own poetry. In "Heaven as Anus" from that year, a poem attacked as pornographic by a major public figure, I seized on the U.S. government's use of animals for experimentation. It opens with:

In the Defense Department there is a shop
where scientists sew the eyelids of rabbits open
lest they blink in the scorch of a nuclear drop

and closes with these lines:

It all ends at the hole. No words may enter
the house of excrement. We will meet there
as the sphincter of the good Lord opens wide
and He takes us all inside.

In 1982, in "Lines Written in the Library of Congress after the Cleanth Brooks Lecture," I wrote about the relationship between poetry and history:

Poetry
makes nothing happen.
It survives
in the valley of its saying.
Auden taught us that.

.....

New poets will lie on their backs
listening in the valley
making nothing happen
overhearing history
history time
personal identity
inching toward Armageddon.

For much of my poetic lifetime, my focus was on the natural world, untampered with and unromanticized. But the face of violence and human cruelty eventually broke through—perhaps abetted by the fact that I have a daughter who worked for thirty-two years for the United Nations Refugee Agency. Hence my anguished rant against the Bosnian war and its impact on civilians in the 1994 sonnet "Cross-Country Skiing," which doesn't abandon the natural world, but puts it in perspective:

I love to be lured under the outstretched wings
of hemlocks heavily snowed upon, the promise
of haven they hold seductively out of the wind
beckoning me to stoop under, tilt my face
to the brashest bits that sift through. Sequestered,
I think how in the grainy videos
of refugees, snow thick as flaking plaster
falls on their razed villages. Snow
forms a cunning scrim through which the ill-clad
bent under bundles of bedding and children appear
nicely muted, trudging slow motion to provide
a generic version of misery and terror
for those who may step out of their skis to sit
under hemlock wings in all-American quiet.

In the same vein, "Mulching" from 2007's *Still to Mow* talks of reading the headlines while spreading old newspapers between plants in the vegetable garden:

prostrate before old suicide bombings, starvation,
AIDS, earthquakes, the unforeseen tsunami,
front - page photographs of lines of people

with everything they own heaped on their heads,
the rich assortment of birds trilling on all
sides of my forest garden, the exhortations

of commencement speakers at local colleges,
the first torture revelations under my palms
and I a helpless citizen of a country

I used to love ...

My disenchantment turned to fury as the war in Iraq gathered steam, with the appalling use of torture by the United States and its proxies, the legal maneuvering at Guantanamo, and more. Now, nearly sixty years after my first four lines of light verse were published in the *Christian Science Monitor*, I feel that my work has truly metamorphosed into the poetry of witness, though my political poems were wrung from me. Some, like "Red Tape and Kangaroo Courts" from the *Hudson Review* (2012), are in unrhymed sonnet form. One, "Entering Houses at Night;" evolved as a villanelle; another, "What You Do," as a pantoum—both to be found in *Still to Mow* and then included in *Where I Live: New & Selected Poems 1999-2010* (2011). Thematically, these poems are linked by my despair at the

monstrous contempt American officialdom has displayed for justice and morality in the years since the 9/11 attacks:

the list of things that are prohibited
in the camps is itself prohibited
.....

and capital cases are heard with no
capital defense attorneys allowed

(from "Red Tape and Kangaroo Courts")

We went in punching kicking yelling out orders
in our language, not theirs.

(from "Entering Houses at Night")

when you shackle them higher
are you still Christian
when you kill by crucifixion

(from "What You Do")

Although metrics serve as a way of giving shape to my anger and enabling my poetry to voice moral outrage, some of my rants are in free verse. Whatever methods writers in all genres use, we have to bear witness, hew to our personal compass, and stand up to be counted. To paraphrase Auden in his prescient poem "September 1, 1939," all we have is a voice "to undo the folded lie." Today we have literally thousands of poets raising their anguished voices, not just in English, but in Arabic, Russian, Farsi, and a hundred other tongues. Are our poems succinct, stunning, intensely moving? Of course we hope they are. Do they change the course of elections, undo death penalties, pardon political prisoners, expose fraud and corruption? These are rhetorical questions, but the poetry of witness at least provides a living archive, exposing the folded lies.

* * *

About the Author

Maxine Kumin's seventeenth poetry collection, *Where I Live: New and Selected Poems 1990-2010* (W. W. Norton, 2010), won the Los Angeles Times Book Prize in 2011. Kumin's other awards include the Pulitzer Prize, the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, the Poets' Prize, and the Harvard Arts and Robert Frost medals. A former United States poet laureate, Kumin lives with her husband on a farm in the Mink Hills of New Hampshire, where they have raised horses for forty years and enjoyed the companionship of several rescued dogs.

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