

# The New York Times

## Maxine Kumin, Pulitzer-Winning Poet With a Naturalist's Precision, Dies at 88

Margalit Fox - The New York Times, February 7, 2014

Maxine Kumin, a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet whose spare, deceptively simple lines explored some of the most complex aspects of human existence - birth and death, evanescence and renewal, and the events large and small conjoining them all - died on Thursday at her home in Warner, N.H. She was 88.

Her death was announced by her daughter Judith Kumin, who said that her mother had been in declining health for the last year and a half.

The author of essays, novels, short stories and children's books as well as poetry, Ms. Kumin (pronounced KYOO-min, like the spice) was praised by critics for her keen ear for the aural character of verse — the clash and cadence of meter, the ebb and flow of rhyme — and her naturalist's eye for minute observation.

She was the consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress, as the United States poet laureate was then known, from 1981 to 1982; from 1989 to 1994 she was the poet laureate of New Hampshire, where she and her husband, Victor, had lived full time since the mid-1970s.

Ms. Kumin won the Pulitzer in 1973 for "Up Country," her fourth volume of verse. The book examined life on and around the tumbledown New Hampshire farm the couple had bought in 1963, on which they raised horses and grew organic vegetables.

In "Homecoming," a poem from the collection here in its entirety, Ms. Kumin wrote:

Having come unto  
the tall house of our habit  
where it settles rump downward  
on its stone foundations  
in the manner of a homely brood mare  
who throws good colts  
and having entered  
where sunlight is pasted on the windows  
ozone rises from the mullions  
dust motes pollinate the hallway  
and spiders remembering a golden age  
sit one in each drain  
we will hang up our clothes and our vegetables  
we will decorate the rafters with mushrooms  
on our hearth we will burn splits of silver popple  
we will stand up to our knees in their flicker  
the soup kettle will clang five notes of pleasure  
and love will take up quarters.

Most critics agreed that Ms. Kumin's finest poems were those that trained their focus close to home. Those on large political subjects like mankind's dubious stewardship of the land, reviewers said, sometimes read better as prose than as poetry.

Ms. Kumin's nearly 20 volumes of verse include her first, "Halfway" (1961); "The Retrieval System" (1978); "Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief" (1982); "The Long Marriage" (2001); and "Where I Live" (2010).

A last collection by Ms. Kumin, "And Short the Season," is to be published this spring, as is "Lizzie!," a partly autobiographical novel for young adults about a girl coping with a spinal-cord injury.

Ms. Kumin's style defied tidy categorization. Though her poems and essays centered on the New England countryside, she trafficked in none of the sentimental effusions of traditional pastoral poets. Her dark, ironic poem "Highway Hypothesis" made clear just what she thought of such unexamined romanticizing:

Bucophilia, I call it —  
nostalgia over a pastoral vista —  
where for all I know the farmer  
who owns it or rents it just told his  
wife he'd kill her if she left him and  
she did and he did and now here come  
the auctioneer, the serious bidders  
and an ant-train of gawking onlookers.

Though nearly all of Ms. Kumin's writing was rooted in personal experience — her relationships with her family, the pleasurable rhythm of farm chores, the deep connection she felt to animals — it was devoid of the lush emotionalism of confessional poets like Anne Sexton, Ms. Kumin's close friend until her suicide in 1974.

And though Ms. Kumin was a strong feminist (in 1998 she and Carolyn Kizer resigned as chancellors of the Academy of American Poets to protest the lack of women and minority-group members in the organization's leadership), her poetry was rarely as overtly political as that of her contemporary Adrienne Rich, who died in 2012.

If there was a thematic constant in Ms. Kumin's work, it was the fragile yet reassuringly durable balance in which connection, rupture and continuity find themselves arranged. All poems are elegies at their core, she often said.

The stylistic hallmarks of her poetry include carefully calibrated rhythms; frequent, often witty use of rhyme, near-rhyme and assonance (also called vowel rhyme); and clean, unadorned diction.

Ms. Kumin was such an evangelist for the sound of poetry that she exhorted her students — she taught at Tufts, New England College, the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference and elsewhere — to memorize 30 to 40 lines of it a week.

“The other reason, as I tell their often stunned faces, is to give them an internal library to draw on when they are taken political prisoner,” she told *The Times-Picayune* of New Orleans in 2000. “For many, this is an unthinkable concept; they simply do not believe in anything fervently enough to go to jail for it.”

Ms. Kumin was herself a great memorizer, and in her work one can hear the faint, benevolent echoes of the poets she drank in as a child: Gerard Manley Hopkins, A. E. Housman, Marianne Moore and others.

A star swimmer as a girl, she practiced strokes to the murmur of meter in her head; she later took car trips with memorized verse for company, a habit that informed her poem “Almost Spring, Driving Home, Reciting Hopkins”:

“A devout but highly imaginative Jesuit,”  
Untermeyer says in my yellowed  
college omnibus of modern poets,  
perhaps intending an oxymoron, but is it?  
Shook foil, sharp rivers start to flow.  
Landscape plotted and pieced, gray-blue, snow-pocked  
begins to show its margins. Speeding back  
down the interstate into my own hills  
I see them fickle, freckled, mounded fully  
and softened by millennia into pillows.  
The priest’s sprung metronome tick-tocks,  
repeating how old winter is. It asks  
each mile, snow fog battering the valleys,  
what is all this juice and all this joy?

The poetic library in Ms. Kumin’s head would later help her endure a long, painful captivity of her own.

The youngest of four children of a Jewish family, Maxine Winokur was born in Philadelphia on June 6, 1925. Her mother, the former Belle Simon, was an amateur pianist; her father, Peter, ran a highly successful pawn brokerage; and Maxine grew up in a vast six-chimneyed house imbued with a fairy-tale grandeur.

Maxine did her first few years of schooling at a Roman Catholic convent because it happened to be next door to the house; she finished at local public schools. At 18 she was offered a job with Billy Rose’s *Aquacade*, but her father, deeming a swimsuit-clad entertainment extravaganza no fit calling for a young lady, forbade it.

She received a bachelor’s degree in history and literature from Radcliffe in 1946 and wed Victor Kumin, an engineer, that year. After receiving a master’s in comparative literature from Radcliffe in 1948, she was enveloped by marriage and motherhood in the Boston suburbs.

In the late 1950s Ms. Kumin enrolled in a local poetry-writing workshop, where Ms. Sexton was also a student. They became such close friends, and such close readers of each other's work, that each installed a dedicated phone line in her house on which to call the other. When writing, they left the receivers off the hook; the moment one finished a poem she would whistle into the open line, and the other would come running to hear it, a system that proved a supremely effective forerunner of instant messaging.

Ms. Sexton's suicide shook Ms. Kumin deeply. "A month after your death I wear your blue jacket," she wrote in a poem, "How It Is." It continues:

The dog at the center of my life recognizes  
you've come to visit, he's ecstatic.  
In the left pocket, a hole.  
In the right, a parking ticket  
delivered up last August on Bay State Road.  
In my heart, a scatter like milkweed,  
a flinging from the pods of the soul.

Ms. Kumin's other books include the novels "Through Doooms of Love" (1965) and "Quit Monks or Die!" (1999), a mystery with an animal-rights theme; a short-story collection, "Why Can't We Live Together Like Civilized Human Beings?" (1982); and "In Deep: Country Essays" (1987).

One of her most talked-about works of nonfiction was her memoir, "Inside the Halo and Beyond" (2000), a book born of swift, deep adversity.

An accomplished horsewoman, Ms. Kumin was training for a carriage-driving show in 1998 when her horse was spooked by a passing truck. She was thrown from the carriage, which weighed 350 pounds; the horse then pulled the carriage over her. She suffered serious internal injuries, 11 broken ribs and a broken neck.

A doctor told her afterward that 95 percent of patients with her injuries die; of those who survive, 95 percent remain quadriplegic.

Ms. Kumin spent months encased in a cervical-traction halo.

"Imagine a bird cage big enough for a large squawking parrot," she wrote. "Imagine a human head inside the cage fastened by four titanium pins that dig into the skull. The pins are as sharp as ice picks."

She was sustained, she later said, by her family (her daughter Judith typed the spoken words that became the memoir); by her beloved Boston Red Sox; and by the reams of poems she harbored within her. After a grueling rehabilitation, Ms. Kumin regained most of her mobility and even rode horses again, though she lived with chronic pain to the end of her life.

How, Ms. Kumin's work asked repeatedly, can one weather the losses life's course makes inevitable? The answer, that same work said, lay in the promise of continuity from generation to generation.

Besides her daughter Judith, Ms. Kumin's survivors include her husband; another daughter, Jane Kumin; a son, Daniel; and two grandchildren, one of whom inspired these lines, from "A Game of Monopoly in Chavannes":

His lower lip trembles, this luxury of a child  
who burst naked into our lives, like luck. ...  
I will deed him the Reading Railroad, the Water Works,  
the Electric Company, my hotel on Park Place.  
All that I have is his, under separate cover,  
and we are the mortgaged nub of all that he has.  
Soon enough he will learn, buying long, selling short,  
his ultimate task is to stay to usher us out.