

## MAXINE KUMIN

Poet, 1925 – 2014

by Alicia Ostriker

It is thrilling to be celebrating Maxine Kumin as a Jewish woman, for although Kumin was determinedly secular, she is for me a quintessential woman of valor, one who was both practical and compassionate, who in her life and her art followed the command “therefore choose life.” Among those of us who have been traveling in her wake for decades, she was and is a model of how to live, as well as how to write, courageously and sanely, with artistic craft and generosity, out of a profound love of our shared life. This, for her, included not only human life, but animal and vegetable life, and in fact the life of the planet—in all its bodily sensuousness, all its fragility.

Born Maxine Winokur into a Reform Jewish family in Germantown, Pennsylvania, she received her BA in 1946 and her MA in 1948 from Radcliffe College. Married in June 1946 to Victor Kumin, with whom she would have two daughters and a son, Kumin “began writing poetry in the Dark Ages of the fifties with very little sense of who I was—a wife, a daughter, a mother, a college instructor, a swimmer, a horse lover, a hermit.” It was before the women’s movement. It was a time when the editor of a literary journal could reject her poems with the explanation that he had already published a poem by a woman last month. Yet she published her first book, *Halfway*, in 1961; in 1973 she received the Pulitzer for *Up Country*, and went on to publish nineteen volumes of poetry—as well as novels and short stories, essays about poetry and about country life, twenty-three children’s books including several co-authored with her beloved friend Anne Sexton, and a memoir, *Inside the Halo*, of recovery from a near fatal equestrian accident.

How did this come about? In the poem “Life’s Work,” Kumin remembers the story of her mother “fresh out of the Conservatory,” stopped in her career tracks by an irate father “saying no daughter of mine...” and Kumin’s own “perfect daddy...wearing gravy on his face” forbidding her to join the Aquacade, swearing she would come to grief. “Well,” she remarks as if casually, “the firm old fathers are dead/ and I didn’t come to grief/ I came to words instead.”

As I write, I notice that the title of this poem can be taken two ways. A life’s work is a career; but for Kumin, life was work, and Kumin worked at her poetry just as she worked at honoring parents and caring for children, a farm, horses about to foal, a barn to muck out daily, a vegetable garden to tend and provender to put up for winter: with skill as well as passion. Her seemingly conversational “plain style” and sense of humor are, like Robert Frost’s, cannily designed to capture the reader. During Kumin’s eighteen-year friendship with Anne Sexton, whom she met in a writing workshop when they were both young mothers, the two women kept a phone line open in their respective Boston suburbs, and workshopped poems with each other almost daily, honing their craft, respecting each other’s styles.

After Sexton’s suicide, Kumin and her husband made their permanent home in what they named PoBiz Farm, in New Hampshire. As a keenly observant nature poet, she was (unlike Frost and most

other poets of the natural world including her much-loved Thoreau) never merely an observer. In the title poem of *The Retrieval System*, death and life blur: ponies begging for apples resemble two elderly aunts; a boy buried at sea reappears in a yearling's gallop; splitting logs at the woodpile simultaneously releases the soul of the beech and recalls the soul of the lost friend. Children, especially daughters, crop up in numerous poems. A final purple cabbage in the garden is "big as a baby's head, big as my grandson's brain." Accused by a sour critic of "an excess of maternal genes," she turned the criticism into boast. "Darlings, it's all a circle," she wrote. In "Caring: a Dream," she remarks, "nor is it one thing to save animals/ and people another/ but seamless." Small wonder one of her books was titled *Nurture*.

Kumin's appetite for life was inevitably shadowed by mortality—but mortality in her poems is inevitably brightened by her evocation of existence as ongoing cycle. Although she wrote often in grief and rage against "the dark and degrading" history (and present history) of human evil, and although she survived more than one crippling accident, she was always being "stunned into wholeness." As she urged in "Women and Horses," we should celebrate what we can, including howling and serene babies and the steamy sex lives of "the able-bodied among us" and stay feisty. Aging, she wrestled with public issues including Nazism, pollution, the extinction of species, war, nuclear holocaust, famine and—fearlessly—United States' involvement in the torture of prisoners. Criticized for being political, she stood her ground. Upon receiving the Frost Medal in 2006, she defended the obligation of the poet "to bear witness."

Beyond her early Pulitzer, Kumin was the recipient of numerous major awards including the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, an American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award, and a Robert Frost Medal. She was Poetry Consultant for the Library of Congress in 1981–82, a position shortly afterward re-named the Poet Laureateship of America. While there, she initiated a brown-bag lunch program for women poets, and become one of the early supporters of the Afro-American poet Lucille Clifton. She taught at many of the country's most esteemed universities, including MIT, Princeton, and Columbia, but also at small ones like New England College, where I watched her urge MFA students to remember the importance of "location, location, location" and saw students return from meeting with her at PoBiz Farm glowing with inspiration. Along with Carolyn Kizer, she was a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets; their highly publicized resignation from that organization precipitated an overhaul, which opened it to more women and minorities.

I first met Maxine in 1977 at a Breadloaf Writers conference, where she encouraged my novice ambitions with the combination of generosity and firmness that was her signature, and that nurtured several generations of younger poets. Inevitably, she became a model to follow. Over the years it was my privilege to swim without benefit of bathing suit in Maxine's pond, help harvest and eat her vegetables, cook in her kitchen, walk in her woods, and be laughed at for my pathetic performance as a horsewoman on her trails. It was my joy to sit and go over our manuscripts together, and to learn from her the meaning of legacy. As she liked to say, "We go on."

Alicia Ostriker, a poet and critic, was a finalist for the National Book Award for *The Crack in Everything* (Pittsburgh, 1996) and *The Little Space* (Pittsburgh 1998), and has published fourteen volumes of poetry, most recently *The Old /woman, the Tulip, and the Dog* (Pittsburgh, 2014). Ostriker lives in Princeton, NJ, is Professor Emerita of English at Rutgers University, and teaches in the low-residency Poetry MFA program of Drew University.