

# The CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

## Maxine Kumin: New Life in a Barn

Steven Ratiner

Christian Science Monitor, May 13, 1992

It is a false-spring day in late February, and my car fishtails lazily, hauling itself up the once-frozen, now mud-slushed road. The first thing that catches my eye when I arrive at Maxine Kumin's home is the sign high on the barn wall: "Pobiz Farm" — a bit of humor twice-compounded, just what one would expect from a crafter of language. This modest horse farm survives (the sign implies) only through the auspices of that other business Ms. Kumin is engaged in: poetry. And, of course, only another poet would grasp what a tenuous and absurd occupation it is — selling words: the art of making language and images sing themselves alive so that a reader might join them in the music.

Maxine Kumin has long survived in the "pobiz," precisely because of her unreasonable and passionate commitment to the life of language. Never one to be steered by literary fashion or academic orthodoxy, she has cultivated her clear, intimate, irrepensible poems in the same determined manner she's used to nurture family, farm animals, and her small corner of the earth. A Pulitzer Prize winner and poetry consultant for the Library of Congress, Ms. Kumin is the author of novels, short stories, essays, and 10 volumes of poetry. The newest, "*Looking for Luck*," was recently issued by W. W. Norton & Co.

Checking my shoe size, Ms. Kumin scrounges up a pair of Wellingtons for me, and we head straight for the barn, accompanied by a complement of cats and dogs. Work takes on a dreamlike rightness when it is rooted in daily practice and profound pleasure. I watch her and her husband, Victor, make their rounds, ministering to each creature in turn — the ritual of their husbandry that is set down so faithfully in her poem "Feeding Time." I begin to feel how the simple moments resonate in her imagination. The literature of our time is richer and more humane for the caretaking of poets like Maxine Kumin.

**Steven Ratiner: I think it's fair to say that, in your poems, the natural world receives more consistent praise than human nature and society. Where does that feeling come from?**

Maxine Kumin: I guess out of my own observations. I don't see that kind of depravity in the natural world that I see in the human world.

**But how did that bond with nature come about in your life?**

I think it was the good fortune of my childhood that I grew up in suburban Philadelphia — in Germantown, but virtually on the edge of Fairmount Park, which is a huge park complex that runs

from center city well out into the suburbs. And as kids we had an enormous amount of freedom. That was before anybody worried about children being abducted, sexually abused, or whatever. And as long as you got home in time for supper with your hands and face washed, you could be gone all day in the woods.... We spent endless hours lying in wait for our favorite park guard, who might just let us sit on his horse. So really early I think I cultivated this kind of bond with the natural world.

**In the poem "Credo," the relationship you describe with your horses is astonishingly intimate, almost a mystical bond.**

*I trust them to run from me, necks  
arched in a full swan's S, tails cocked up over their  
backs like plumes on a Cavalier's hat.  
I trust them  
to gallop back, skid to a stop,  
their nostrils  
level with my mouth, asking for  
my human breath  
that they may test its intent, taste  
the smell of it.*

Well, I'm afraid of words like "mystical" and "spiritual," since I'm neither, I think. But I'm not sure how to characterize what it is. There's some kind of nonverbal communication that takes place between humans and animals.... I'm fascinated just exploring that interrelationship.

**But the poem goes on to say, "I believe in myself as their sanctuary/ and the earth with its summer plumes of carrots,/ its clamber of peas, beans, masses of tendrils/ as mine."**

That's certainly true for my horses. I am their sanctuary. We've done this to them. We've taken them out of their wild state. It's pitiful to see this out West. The cattlemen have driven the tattered remnants of the wild horse bands up into the mountains, practically above the tree line where there's virtually nothing to eat, where it's very difficult for them to find enough water to stay alive. And it's all in the name of the almighty steer that we eat....

We turned [nature] to our own uses. And having done that, we have a moral responsibility to take care of what we've taken on. So, in that sense, I'm feeding them, I'm housing them, I'm cleaning up after them. I am indeed their sanctuary.

**I know you've taken care of many abused and abandoned animals. But the implication in the poem is much broader. As a people, are we "caretakers" of the natural world?**

Well, it is to be wished. What can I say? Clearly we're not.

**The poem "Hay" has a line that says, "Allegiance to the land is tenderness." But that's not easy to feel if you live in New York City or Los Angeles.**

I feel great compassion and sorrow for people who have to live in high-rises. It would be the death of me. If I couldn't open the door and put my feet on earth, I think I would languish and just fade away.

**What would you be missing? How are you enriched by the experience of walking on your hillside, of feeding the animals each day?**

I don't know if I can express it. But it completes me, makes me feel whole, makes me feel an integral part of the world that I live in. That I'm one more healthy organism in this little microcosm here on the earth.... It's very much a part of the New England consciousness, I think. The fact that we have four well-defined seasons.... Because we've toughed-out winter, we've earned our spring. Then we go through the season of dreadful black flies, followed by mosquitoes. And you have to be of stern stuff to put up with all that to get those few good months. But to have to live ... in the terrible sameness of the concrete canyons of the city, ... never to see the changing skyscape as the seasons turn — this, to me, is to be deprived.

**It reminds me of the poem "Rejoicing with Henry" where you show your neighbor your new foal. "Next year, if I live that long,/ she'll stand in the shafts. Come Christmas Day/ we'll drive that filly straight to town./ Worth waiting for, that filly. Nobody says/ the word aloud: Rejoice." That's life's prize, isn't it?**

Oh, yes! Absolutely. To have, as we say, "a foal in the oven," shortens the winter remarkably. I mean, not expecting one this spring is my great sorrow, because all winter long, through thick and thin, through 30 below, you can console yourself with the thought that come May, come June, you're going to have new life in the barn.

**Reading through your books, I was confronted again with the idea of a "women's poetry." At one time, feminist writers felt this classification marginalized their work. But more and more now, there are such dramatic differences between men and women poets — not just in styles and subjects but in the sense of purpose that's embedded in the vision. Do you see yourself as a "women's writer"?**

Yes, I do. I mean, I write from a woman's perspective because I am a woman. It's as simple as that. I'm attracted to certain subjects because of my gender, and there are certain subjects I clearly can write about that perhaps a man can't.

A poem like "Noah, at Six Months" just couldn't come from a man's sensibility. There is a constant awareness of life's comings and goings in your work, with the image of family as the one steady presence between.

Certainly those tribal poems about children are quintessentially female, I think.... We have just the two grandchildren.... Noah is now two years and two months old, and he was just here yesterday. And he's just an incredible child.... This little kid sits at the table and counts [us] to see how many we make. Then he counts Josh and Rilke [the Kumin's dogs] because they're family. Then he counts the horses because they're family, too. It's marvelous to see this continuum.

**There are also a large number of poems about women in the new book. Some mention famous names, but more focus on ordinary individuals struggling with the burdens of daily existence like the "Chambermaids in the Marriott."**

Well, that's a "pobiz" poem.... When I go out to give readings, I try to piggyback them so I don't go just for one overnight.... And hopping across the country you do see scenes like this.... They are the unheralded ones who, with Rabelaisian vigor, are out there living their lives. That was what was so heartening about them, I think — to see that they had so much zest. Even imprisoned in what must look to you and me like terrible dead-end jobs. But to them, there is the camaraderie of cleaning together on the 14th floor, and the camaraderie of knowing they're going to plug into the same soaps ... of being able to share the events of their lives which are sometimes more soap opera than soap opera.

**That's where the political aspect of your poetry is most apparent. You carry your readers into points-of-view that we might normally struggle to avoid. But we can't even imagine how other Americans live, let alone other peoples from around the world.**

Well, I think we're seeing the danger it puts us in. Look at this recent campaign here in New Hampshire.... It's just come down to slogans, nothing but a sound byte here, a sound byte there. Everything is reduced to the lowest common denominator. And it just makes people more and more solipsistic.... So, in a sense then, it becomes the mission of the poet and any writer to alert people to the danger.

**There is that painful awareness in your poems that sometimes language binds us and other times it becomes the barrier. There's the section in "Telling the Barn Swallow" about your daughter moving to Europe. "Now she will raise her children/ in a language that rusts in my mouth,/ in a language that locks up my jaw." What do you fear will be lost between you and your grandchildren?**

My mother tongue is English. We're never going to have quite the comfortable commonality of a shared tongue. And no matter how hard I try to improve, for example, my French [is] not going to match their French.

But then the poem goes on to warn the swallow: "to cover well her hatch/ I tell her that this hour/ must outlast the pies and the jellies,/ must stick in my head like a burdock bur." Why? What can words and images contain that will penetrate this barrier of time and distance?

Love. What else can I call it?

**But the image of "a bur" makes me think of a painful persistence.**

No, burdock burs aren't painful. I'm picking them out of the dogs all the time. A bur is merely a seed, a way of moving from point "A" to point "B" where it can finally drop to the ground and sprout.

**So is that the task that falls to the poet: to preserve family stories, family loves, history, and beliefs?**

For me, yes.... You collect the saga, and you hand it on.

**And what do we do with it then?**

Well, then they, the next generation, will keep it and they'll hand it on. That's the kind of continuity which is our only immortality.

Poetry distills experience. I say to students all the time, life is not art. Art is something that takes a step beyond. It transmutes what you take out of life experience and enables you to build on it.

**As a writer, you have a gift for simply following your own impulses. But what keeps your poetry on course?**

Just that inner compass that you're probably not conscious of.... I don't really see the direction that something has taken until it takes it. You just have to be open. Rilke says, "Await the birth-hour of a new clarity, keeping holy all that befalls, even disappointment, even desertion."

**Do you think this farm helps you to maintain that openness?**

Oh yes. This is where you do "keep holy all that has befallen." I know that.