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Tempus Fugit

By Maureen Thorson

And Short the Season
Maxine Kumin
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Many poets set out to write a first book. Few, I think, set out to write a last one. But the first necessarily implies the last – whoever begins a journey will finish traveling sometime. Maxine Kumin published her first book in 1961, when she was 36 years old, relatively late for a contemporary American poet. Known for plain-speaking verse and ecological focus, many of Kumin's poems were inspired by, or set on, her New Hampshire farm (a fact that once earned her the sobriquet of "Roberta Frost"). She died this past February at the age of 88, just before her eighteenth collection, *And Short the Season*, was due to be published. Now that the book is out in the world, it is difficult not to read it as a "summing up." *And Short the Season* is pervaded by themes of mortality and extinction, treating the latter with a Cassandra-like sense of urgency. The poems call the reader to greater awareness of his interdependence with other life – human, animal, and otherwise – while documenting and memorializing the connections between Kuman and her forebears, both biological and literary.

The collection's opening poem, "Whereof the Gift is Small," skillfully sets up these themes. It takes its title from a line appearing in "Brittle Beauty," a sonnet by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey. Howard has the pleasant distinction of being, along with Spenser, Shakespeare, and Sir Thomas Wyatt, one of the fathers of the English sonnet, and the more dubious one of having been Henry VIII's final victim (the fates saw fit to snuff out the gout-ridden and paranoiac monarch only a few days after Howard was dispatched for imaginary treason).

Howard's "Brittle Beauty" is about the misleading nature of feminine beauty – a topic that was so popular among poets of his cohort that one can only conclude that 16th-century England was positively lousy with wily bombshells. The subject had become entirely conventional by the time Howard took up his pen in the 1530s, but freed of the necessity of making an original point, he took the opportunity to display virtuoso alliterative chops and to pepper his poem with sly images. In the compact measure of the sonnet, female beauty ("Whereof the gift is small, and short the season") is described as a "tickle treasure" and a "jewel of jeopardy" that is "slipper in sliding, as is an eel's tail," which ultimately "fare[s] as fruit that with the frost is taken." Howard's verse positively rollicks along, zestfully bouncing from zinger to zinger. The poem is both boast and proof of its author's mastery.

Kumin's "Whereof the Gift is Small," likewise serves a "conventional" theme: memento mori. She adjusts her rhythm to suit – "Whereof the Gift is Small" doesn't swing, it glides: sedate and somber as a swan carved from tombstone marble. But her poem nonetheless holds a mirror up to Howard's, matching his alliterations and rhetorical flourishes each for each:

And short the season, first rubythroat
in the fading lilacs, alyssum in bloom,

a honeybee bumbling in the bleeding heart
on my gelding's grave while beetles swarm
him underground. Wet feet, wet cuffs,
little flecks of buttercup on my sneaker toes,
bluets, violets crowding out the tufts
of rich new grass the horses nose
and nibble like sleepwalkers held fast—
brittle beauty—might this be the last?

Kumin was noted for her attention to form; there is reason she takes Howard as a forebear. But attention is not the same as obedience. "Whereof the Gift is Small" is not slavish to the pentameter and it starts with rhymes so slant that they almost don't exist. It then resolves gracefully into masculine rhyme – a change that could easily have resulted in a gongish clanging. And of course, Kumin's poem isn't even a sonnet – it has only ten lines, thereby going Howard one better in terms of compactness and neatly encapsulating its own "short season."

The poem's details are real and particular; they have the sense of lived time, of lived space, and of words appropriate to that space – sneakers and bluets bestow their individual gravity to the work. The best poems in *And Short the Season* maintain this delicate marriage of form and diction, neither crowding out the other, but both acting in concert. Kumin manages the feat particularly well in "Whereof the Gift is Small," only to match it in "Elegy Beginning with Half a Line from Ben Jonson," and to exceed it in "The Furtive Visit," as perfect a short poem as I have read in a long time:

We opened the foxed pages of our hearts
back, further back, and let them stand,
climbed through mild rain to the nippled pond,
clung in a wet embrace, then drew apart.

I watched the taillights judder as you took
the downhill elbows of the mudslicked lane
minutes shy of midnight. Not again,
I thought, whistling the dogs back in,

the rain now picking up its steady redirect.

Kumin's diction takes some of its direction from William Carlos Williams' insistence on an American idiom, and on poetry that is not divorced from "things" – from the particularities of place and experience. In a poem like "The Furtive Visit," the overtly poetic language ("nippled pond") is subordinated to phrasing that is speech-based, local and probable. "Minutes shy of midnight" is both poetic and actually possible, a real thing someone would really say to describe a certain time. What is spoken of, too, is real in its emotional and sensory detail. Kumin's poetry sings when she takes to heart Williams' emphasis on lived experience, described with such seemingly plain, but indisputably genuine, language.

Nonetheless, Kumin's desire to observe connections (buoyed by her care with, and for, words) could also lead her astray. Several poems in *And Short the Season* attempt to hammer an etymological or historical coincidence into an epiphany, each sending the attentive reader bird-dogging amongst

dictionaries and the backwaters of the internet to flush out elusive quotations and coy allusions. But the connections that the poems attempt to trace are forced or incomplete. “Purim and the Beetles of Our Lady,” for example, appears to have resulted from internet searches that Kumin conducted after finding her home invaded by ladybugs. The poem notes that the Latin name of the North American ladybug is “coleomegilla maculata”; it connects that with the Yiddish word “megillah,” meaning a long, over-involved story, in turn derived from the Hebrew “megillot,” indicating five specific books of the Old Testament written on scrolls, including the Book of Esther. That book gets glossed, as do medieval legends connecting ladybugs with the Virgin Mary, as well as information on how to use ladybugs to combat aphids, and digressions into Spellcheck’s corrections of words in the poem in progress, etc.

What all this adds up to is certainly a megillah of sorts, in which Kumin loosely connects herself, as a putative destroyer of ladybugs who might be dissuaded by learning about their origin, with the Book of Esther’s Haman, whose plot to destroy the Jews is foiled when Queen Esther’s Jewish origins are revealed. But what is the point of drawing such a connection? It seems simply bizarre to equate the death of Jews with the death of ladybugs; even if Kumin were attempting to press the point of the fundamental worthiness and dignity of all life, she acknowledges that no amount of internet research can really resign her to the fact of ladybugs in the house; in other words, she’s likely to kill them anyway. On the part of readers everywhere, I can only say, “huh?”

Several other poems attempt to bridge gaps between disparate things in this manner and at least two of them — “No Place” and “The Bird, the Court of Common Pleas, The Czar” – join “Purim and the Beetles of Our Lady” in trying to forge odd and unsatisfactory parallels involving Jewish persecutors. But the question of “to what possible end?” remains unanswered. These poems have the feeling of drafts by which Kumin was working out how to say something – and what the something was – regarding her Jewish ancestry, the cycle of life represented by her garden, and the brutal facts of anti-Semitism. Had Kumin lived to write another book, we might have seen the subject resolved more satisfactorily; as it is, we have only the equivalent of intriguing, but baffling, notes.

Happily, *And Short the Season*’s emphasis on connections – and the importance of words in creating and describing them – means that, in addition to the convoluted sketches described above, we have several well-wrought elegies to Kumin’s friends and family (both human and animal). These range in tone from the lovely and sweet to the unsettling and haunting. In the realm of the former, “A Day’s Work” describes a forest clearing where honey mushrooms grow:

and do so year after year whether or not
I come to forage among these slabs in the clearing
where men and animals sweated together.

Plucking today’s flush, I salute the artist
whose pen-and-ink sketch of armillaria
hangs on my study wall, how she reported

she drew three versions of our day’s pickings
here fifty-five years ago, then took them home
cooked ‘em up and et ‘em.

The words here are chosen with care – note the assonance of the "eh" sound in "men and animals sweated together," as well as the "u" in "pluck" and "flush" – but concludes by letting Kumin's friend speak for herself. The poem thereby gives voice to a real voice, documenting as much as it memorializes. "Elegy Beginning with Half a Line from Ben Jonson" takes that half a line from Jonson's "A Part of An Ode," written to honor "immortal friendship and memory." Like "Whereof the Gift is Small," Kumin's elegy traces her connection to the poetic past; it also provides her "old college roommate dead of cancer," with whom Kumin once galloped horses and drank spiked punch at parties, with a memorial that is paradoxically full of life:

through smoked glass smoking Parliaments and pot
we are forming ourselves—what tamed us? not
the KGB the CIA the FBI but time that cat

burglar it's dawn I curse your stunning stalker cancer
four five six chemos carry off your zest your hair
radiation strips your frame nevermind you swear

even morphined that you'll beat him all hollow
and then you swim your sweaty horse up to Valhalla.

The enjambment of the poem's lines, along with its flowing rhymes, dancing from straight to slant and coursing onward from tercet to tercet, create a powerful sense of onward rush, of time moving faster and faster toward the poem's concluding couplet, in which death seems not so much a diminishing or concession, but one more thing that is faced with verve and conquered.

Several poems in *And Short the Season* describe the friendships and generative connections between artists. Van Gogh and Gauguin appear in "Xanthopsia," as do Allen Ginsberg and Carl Solomon in "Howl Revisited;" and Walt Whitman and Gerard Manley Hopkins have an imaginary deathbed meeting in "At the End." Kumin herself had a friendship with the poet Anne Sexton; though they denied influencing each other's work, they frequently exchanged drafts, and their poetic stars rose in tandem until Sexton's suicide in 1974. The poem "The Revisionist Dream" is not dedicated to Sexton; it does not mention her by name. But it is difficult not to read it as being about her. It begins:

Well, she didn't kill herself that afternoon.
It was a mild day in October, we sat outside
over sandwiches. She said she had begun

to practice yoga, take piano lessons . . .

and ends:

She said she had begun

accelerandos, Julia Child, and some
expand-a-lung deep breaths to do in bed
so she didn't kill herself that afternoon.
We ate our sandwiches. The dream blew up at dawn.

The poem takes the form of a villanelle – a French form that relies on repeating lines, and thus offers a limited number of rhymes. In English, it has a tendency to sound obsessive, over-managed, Kuminselectedand stagey. Kumin manages hers with characteristic smoothness – she varies the repeating lines subtly, maintaining a natural sound to the language. The poem's details deny the drama that is gathering about them – the sandwiches, the "expand-a-lung" breathing. Even the poem's opening tries to deny its own momentousness with that deflective "well." But the dream blows up, as does the villanelle itself — Its final line refuses to repeat the "she said she had begun" that the form requires, ending instead with a slant-rhymed explosion. Poems like "The Revisionist Dream" redeem *And Short the Season*'s stumbles – its convoluted factoid-collections, and some poems about Guantanamo and the detention of Bradley Manning that, no matter how worthy the subject matter, come across as stilted and brittle.

Perhaps the best poem in the collection is one that appears rather odd at first blush – out of sorts in the company of compact, formal efforts like villanelles or the longer poems that mass historical and cultural detail. "The Path, the Chair" is a disarmingly simple, seemingly unfocused piece. It begins with Kumin

Walking the fields before the first snow
silently saying my breviary of poems:
Yeats Easter, Auden's September,
reams of Wordsworth's Intimations

After noting that she "side[s] with these Romantic democrats," Kumin goes on, at some length, to describe each of the fields that makes up her New Hampshire farm:

Field Three, once fenced in wire,
now strictly held by Nature.

Three overlooks The Pear Tree Field
where a single wild Bartlett stands
freed from the smother of brambles,
beyond the stone wall that once served
to keep sheep fast.

Unhurried, almost ponderous, the poem proceeds to describe the remaining pastures, "the Elysian Field" and the "woodland path from there, soft underfoot/with forest duff" that leads to "nothing fancy, raised beds cobbled/from hemlock boards" that contain a garden fenced with salvaged chicken wire, and Kumin's own

folding chair once formed of crisscrossed plastic,
all dissolved except the metal frame until we wove
both seat and back from baling twine saved from
the squares of hay that fed the growing herd.
Saving is a form of worship.

Ah, there we go. Early in the poem, Kumin alludes to Yeats' Easter, 1916, with its "A terrible beauty is born," and Auden's September 1, 1939, with its "We must love one another or die" – both poems that, in reaction to tragic events, find the poets acknowledging their connection with others and calling the world at large to remembrance and to care. Kumin here is adding her own page to the poet's breviary, with a prayer for preservation:

The restored fields,
the rescued dogs, the ancient horses

named Genesis and Deuteronomy
Eden, Praise Be, Hallelujah, and the farthest field
saluting the Greek gods and goddesses,
our catholic homage to an afterlife
we like the thought of but don't believe in.

"Saving is a form of worship." In the absence of an afterlife, this earth, this time, and each other are all we have. This lends an imperative dignity to salvage; our only honor and redemption comes by way of preserving and restoring the world around us, its people, animals, and places. All of the poems in *And Short the Season* in some way return to this idea of conservation – the tracing of biographical and literary connections, the memorials for friends and family, the calling of the world to account.

With her attention to meter and rhyme, and her affinity for rural, natural landscapes, Kumin might be deemed a sort of poetry "conservative." Peeling back the word's political associations, a conservative is one who holds traditional values in esteem, who does not favor change for its own sake. It is not necessarily someone who wishes to live in the past, but someone who thinks we cannot change for the better by forgetting where we were. *And Short the Season* embodies this type of conservatism – and conservationism – in asking us to remember and, in remembering, to react.

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