

The New York Times

Afraid of the Dark

By DAVID KIRBY

July 9, 2010

WHERE I LIVE

New and Selected Poems 1990-2010

By Maxine Kumin

235 pp. W. W. Norton & Company. \$29.95

Theodor Adorno said, "After Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric," which is true — about Auschwitz. His statement is a measure of the horror of the death camps, not the pointlessness of poetry. Who says poetry has a point anyway? It's more important than that.

Maxine Kumin uses Adorno's statement as an epigraph to "Women and Horses," one of the poems in "*Where I Live*," her latest deeply satisfying collection, which begins with 23 new poems and includes a dozen or more from each of five previous books. And actually, Kumin might say that poetry does have a point, or so it seems in some of the more assertive political poems here.

But not in "Women and Horses," which begins with a litany of cruelty: Auschwitz, where "ten of my father's kin / . . . starved, then were gassed in the camps," then Vietnam, Somalia, Haiti, the World Trade Center towers. After all this, though, "let us celebrate whatever scraps the muse, that naked child, / can pluck from the still-smoldering dumps."

"If there's a lyre around, strike it!" cries the poet. And the rest of the poem celebrates a host of small pleasures: sparrows laying their eggs in bluebird boxes, bluebirds laying theirs elsewhere, "navel-bared teens, eyebrow- and nose-ringed prodigies," fat old ladies in flowery dresses playing bridge, howling babies and babies at rest and, for the able-bodied, steamy sex. There'll always be war, she says, so let us see life, in the words of Isaac Babel, "as a meadow over which women and horses wander."

This poem works because it expresses a desire, not a statement of fact. There are a few war-is-wrong poems here, but we know that, or at least we know that poets think so. (Not long ago I heard someone ask Billy Collins if he planned to contribute to a Poets Against the War anthology, and he said he didn't see the point, because everyone expects poets to be against war, whereas, say, Butchers Against the War would have more of an impact.)

Likewise, there are a few nature-is-holy poems: agreed, so let's move on to something more tantalizing. Emerson liked what he called croisements or "crossings" — points of contact between two different things, leading to some new third and unexpected thing. In his journal he writes of the sea

touching the shore, the taste of two metals at the same time, “our enlarged powers in the presence . . . of a friend.” And Kumin’s best poems thrum with just that kind of energy.

Take the delightful, heart-catching “Sunday Phone Call,” in which the speaker gets a ring from her dead father. Pop! she cries, you’re dead! But that doesn’t keep the old guy from kvetching: “What’s / an educated dame like you / doing messing with horses?” he wants to know. (For years Kumin and her husband have bred Arabian and quarter horses on a New Hampshire farm.) Just before he hangs up, she asks when she’ll see him, and he replies: “I may be dead but / I’m not clairvoyant.”

In the meantime, there are plenty of opportunities for fruitful encounter right here on terra firma, including, in Kumin’s case, collisions with other literary figures. In “*Where I Live*,” she name-checks probably 20 or more: English Romantics (Wordsworth, Coleridge), classic American poets (Whitman, Longfellow), contemporaries (Czeslaw Milosz, Anne Sexton), and such behind-the-scenes types as Carol Houck Smith, Kumin’s old editor and a beloved fixture in the publishing world until her death in 2008.

Kumin’s casual mastery of beat and rhyme suggest her debt to the poets who preceded her. As Emerson knew, poetry is not a terminus but a journey toward a destination never reached — it’s the journey that counts. Poems like “Looking Back in My Eighty-First Year” unroll with a deceptive smoothness that brings to mind Freeman Dyson’s description of the Nobelist Paul Dirac’s papers on quantum mechanics: “Exquisitely carved marble statues falling out of the sky, one after another.” The poems that resonate most are the ones that measure the passage of years, from Kumin’s affection for the “darling nuns” who schooled her (she recalls a tract on menstruation “so vague it led me to believe you bled / that one year only”) through her time as a young wife and mother to her present status as much-published poet and recipient of countless honors, including a Pulitzer in 1973.

Formally, these views of a long and rich life are meted out in classical cadences. In terms of content, Kumin relies on her favorite quadruped as yardstick, referring more than once to “the last two horses of our lives.” The title of the final poem, “Death, Etc.,” is wittily misleading. Here Kumin starts out with a characteristically satisfied look at a marriage of many years that will nonetheless end with one partner left alone, then swerves toward a startlingly grim conclusion when she says “we try to live gracefully” but “in truth we go forward / stumbling, afraid of the dark, / of the cold, and of the great overwhelming / loneliness of being last.”

Hey, what happened to the stoicism? Maybe this is Kumin’s way of pointing out the real importance of her calling. Because it’s not going to end well, folks: Hitler killed his millions, and one of us will be broken by the death of the other. Between now and then, this book says, there’s poetry.

David Kirby is an editor, with Barbara Hamby, of “Seriously Funny: Poems About Love, Death, Religion, Art, Politics, Sex and Everything Else.”