

For Maxine Kumin, 'Writing is my salvation'

The Pulitzer Prize-winning poet has renewed passion for 'poems that matter.'

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By Elizabeth Lund APRIL 15, 2008

Three weeks ago, winter still clung to central New Hampshire, where poet Maxine Kumin and her husband, Victor, live on Pobiz Farm. The sky was gray, snow banks stood more than three feet tall, and the couple's long, dirt driveway was covered with several inches of white from a recent storm. A visiting reporter had to abandon her car 3/10s of a mile from the farmhouse.

Maxine Kumin, whose awards include the Pulitzer Prize, noted the sky after leading her visitor into the living room. Then she turned her attention to Virgil, her energetic hound-mix, who jumped onto the sofa, onto her lap, and then onto her guest's lap. "Virgil has no manners," she explained with a shake of her head. "Pretend he isn't here; he's an invisible dog."

The scene illustrated so much about Kumin, whose poems include many of the strays she has saved and whose spirit seems as indomitable as that of her "invisible" hound, who was escorted out of the room five minutes later. Kumin, in her early 80s, has no intention of slowing down, regardless of what the weather or the calendar might suggest.

That becomes evident as she describes upcoming readings at Tufts University, the University of New Hampshire, the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival (the largest poetry event in North America), and on "A Prairie Home Companion" with Garrison Keillor. She also teaches in the low-residency MFA program at nearby New England College, and will teach in Provincetown, Mass., this summer.

The question brings to mind Kumin's horse-driving accident in 1999, which left her with a broken neck. But Kumin, who has regained most of her mobility, despite doctors' predictions to the contrary, doesn't dwell on the past.

She's focused on the poems she's writing – about nature, the war in Iraq, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge – and on the necessity of remaining vigilant as a writer. "I've reached a point in life where it would be easy to let down my guard and write simple imagistic poems. But I don't want to write poems that aren't necessary. I want to write poems that matter, that have an interesting point of view."

Kumin did just that in her newest collection, "Still to Mow," released last fall. The book included poems about her farm and her family – familiar topics – as well as "torture poems" that were equally praised and panned by critics.

"I want readers to take away a better understanding of what's going on in the world," she says of the grittier work. "I can't believe what is happening in the US. It feels as if we've turned the clock back to the Middle Ages."

Kumin didn't always feel that poets should mix poetry and protest. "Twenty years ago, I thought Denise Levertov was wrong to write political poems, that she would lose her lyrical impulse. But I've changed my mind; I didn't write my poems because I wanted to, they were wrung from me. I had to write them."

Even with other subjects, Kumin feels the need to remain vigilant. "So many poems you go into and come up empty," she says. She expects her poems to engage the reader and satisfy the ear – with meter, rhyme, or assonance, and good line breaks – "where in the line is a gasp?"

Kumin often goes through 12 or 15 drafts. "If I'm working on a poem, it's at the forefront of my mind; I'm working on it when I'm cooking dinner or stretched out on the sofa. But if I don't really have it by the 10th draft, I know it just isn't going to jell."

Kumin's conversation, like her poems, is sharp, varied, and always insightful. She moves easily from talking about her three horses – Boomer, the first foal born on the farm, is now 32 – to composting "we compost religiously," to her admiration for William Wordsworth's poetry and her sympathy for his sister, Dorothy, whom she wrote about in "Still to Mow."

Nurturing – of animals, people, and the earth – is another theme that runs through her days. Virgil, who was once "on death row in New York City," is the latest in a very long line of dogs and horses – plus one feral cat – who have found refuge on Pobiz Farm. Kumin doesn't congratulate herself on her compassion, though. Instead, she shrugs and says, "I take in so many strays because so many need homes."

Her observations about teaching are equally straightforward. "I dislike the use of abstractions, especially absolute nouns. I want my students to use metaphors and similes. I'm tough about that." Her voice becomes softer, though, when she describes a student at New England College who is about to have his first book published, at age 60. "I feel good about that because I mentored him."

The balance of toughness and tenderness, industry and intensity is present throughout her conversation.

"My work has gotten bonier over the past 10 years," she says. "I've always had a narrative thread, but my poems are tougher, more focused now; they use fewer adjectives. The poet's investment in the material is what makes a poem memorable."

Kumin realizes that some readers would prefer she stick to nature poetry, rather than venturing into politics or war again. "My nature poems come from a gentler place," she concedes, "but nature isn't always so clever. A chipmunk only finds 1 out of 4 nuts it stores. That's not a very good design."

After an hour, Kumin is anxious to end the interview and return to her writing. Once planting season starts, in April, she won't have much time for anything but her garden. "I still have a month's worth of onions from last year's harvest. I never have to buy a vegetable," she says.

At the door, she hands her visitor an apple to eat on the ride home, and she looks again at the sky. "The sun keeps trying to come out but can't quite make it."

That's not true of the poet, who remains in a season of activity regardless of what the weather is doing.