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Maxine Kumin, 88; Pulitzer Prize-winning poet

By Bryan Marquard GLOBE STAFF FEBRUARY 08, 2014

Each Maxine Kumin poem was born in the flash of an image, the echo of a rhythm, or some sensation as yet unformed.

“Sometimes that leads somewhere,” she told The New Yorker magazine in 2012, “and sometimes the Muse is just on sabbatical.”

The muse seemed rarely to stray during the more than six decades her poems and every other kind of writing were published. Collected in some four dozen books, she wrote poetry and fiction, essays and children’s stories.

Ms. Kumin, whose health had been declining, was 88 when she died Thursday at the Warner, N.H., farm she and her husband bought half a century ago. They moved there permanently in the mid-1970s from Newton, where she lived when she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1973 for her book “Up Country.”

She was then a close friend of the poet Anne Sexton, with whom she had taken a writing workshop early in their careers. They kept a private phone line between their houses open during the day, whistling into the receiver to summon each other when they had lines to share. The 1974 suicide of Sexton, herself a 1967 Pulitzer-winner for poetry, haunted Ms. Kumin, who wrote:

*Years pass, as they say in story books.
It is true that I dream of you less.
Still, when the phone rings in my sleep
and I answer, a dream- cigarette in my hand,
it is always the same.*

Writing in Greater Boston from the mid-1950s to the mid-’70s, an era when the area was home to poets such as Sexton and Adrienne Rich, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath, Ms. Kumin created a writing career that extended beyond those of her peers.

Maxine Kumin sat for a portrait in her Newton home after she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1973.

BILL BRETT/GLOBE PHOTO/FILE

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“Maxine lasted the longest of that generation,” said Don Share, editor of Poetry magazine. “In a way, I think the trajectory of her work was saner and healthier. She managed to keep going. And she not only survived, but I think her survival comes from being so tough.”

In 1998, already in her 70s, she was thrown from a carriage she was getting ready for an equestrian contest. Spooked, her horse swerved to avoid trampling Ms. Kumin, but dragged the 350-pound carriage over her, breaking her neck and 11 ribs, bruising organs, and puncturing a lung. She lived to keep writing, even dictating while convalescing, and published the memoir “Inside the Halo and Beyond” about the experience.

“This book, while telling of a most personal catastrophe, ties us continually into the natural world that provides the center of this author’s life and work,” Anne Roiphe wrote in a New York Times review in 2000.

“There is an absence of hysteria,” she added. “Instead, a calm emanates from the structure of the sentences, whose stately cadences reassure the reader even as they mark out the hard times.”

Less confessional a poet than Sexton and Lowell, Ms. Kumin could be as political as Rich, speaking out against war and nuclear weapons and criticizing the ways society and the publishing world treat women.

“What Maxine had in the end was courage,” Share said. “She had moral courage and personal courage and physical courage. It was quite remarkable. And she had a twinkle in her eye that could kindle into a brushfire.”

A fearless writer, Ms. Kumin joined Rich in expanding the range of subjects women could choose for poems. As comfortable in the horse barn as at the writing desk, she wrote a poem about excrement and told the Concord Monitor it proved “there is no subject that’s off-limits. . . . It depends on how you make a poem out of it.”

Ms. Kumin “had a fantastic urge to make and create despite terrible pain,” said Donald Hall, a poet who lives farther north in New Hampshire. “The poems are very clean. They don’t get soupy. They’re sharp. They’re hard-edged. They’re looking outward toward the world.”

The work of Ms. Kumin, a prominent teacher through the years in workshops and at schools including Tufts University, was often honored, including with a Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize in 1999 from the Poetry Foundation and the Harvard Arts Medal in 2005. She served as consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress, the former title for a US poet laureate, from 1981 to 1982, and was New Hampshire’s poet laureate from 1989 to 1994.

“She loved slant rhyme, she loved the music of the iambic line, and she made it work in a way that was resonant and enduring because of her fine ear, but also because of her willingness to write about subject matter that was really considered quite taboo,” said the poet Chard deNord, who published an online interview he conducted with Ms. Kumin. “She made it her own music, even though it was conventional. Everybody would recognize a Kumin line.”

The youngest of four children, Maxine Winokur was born in the Germantown section of Philadelphia. Her mother was a pianist, her father a pawnbroker. Jill Bialosky, vice president and executive editor at W.W. Norton & Co., spoke with Ms. Kumin's son Wednesday to say Norton wants to publish "The Pawn-broker's Daughter," a memoir drawn from magazine and literary journal pieces Ms. Kumin wrote about her coming of age as a poet and feminist.

In April, Norton will publish "And the Short Season," a new volume of Ms. Kumin's poetry. "The new poems course with the rhythms of nature and wrestle with mortality," Bialosky — a poet, novelist, and memoirist — wrote in e-mail. "Over the last year working on the new volume seemed to give Maxine renewed energy."

Energy was something Ms. Kumin always seemed to have in abundance. Though raised in what she described on her website as "a nominally observant Reform Jewish family," she was initially educated at a Roman Catholic convent next door. She went to Radcliffe College, from which she graduated with a bachelor's degree and a master's, and while there met Victor Kumin, an engineer she married in 1946.

They raised two daughters, Judith and Jane, and a son, Daniel. In addition to her husband and children, Ms. Kumin also leaves two grandchildren.

In a long Concord Monitor interview posted online in two sections, she said her two major influences in poetry were W.H. Auden and Karl Shapiro. Auden "taught me more about iambic tetrameter than anyone else possibly could," she said. "Both he and Yeats taught me about combining the political and the personal. I learned from them that one could write about the political climate and make poetry from it."

Sexton, meanwhile, provided the title for "Up Country," the collection that brought Ms. Kumin a Pulitzer, and "helped me to open up in ways that I might not have achieved on my own."

"I helped to formalize some of her concepts," she said.

"I think about Anne's suicide constantly," she added in the interview, conducted nearly a decade ago. "It's fresh. I don't think it will ever fade. I think I have finally forgiven her."

Although Ms. Kumin's poems and essays teem with sharply observed life, including the New Hampshire farm where she and her family grew organic vegetables and tended horses, she wrote eloquently and formidably about the end of life, and concluded her poem "Death, Etc." with the lines:

*We try to live gracefully
and at peace with our imagined deaths but in truth we go forward
stumbling, afraid of the dark,
of the cold, and of the great overwhelming
loneliness of being last.*