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Maxine Kumin: A simple life rooted in words, loyalty

By Don Share

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Bostonians call their city “The Hub,” and as with every long embraced metaphor, there’s much truth in it. But when it comes to poetry, a better word would be constellation, since so many stars have moved through its firmament. Everybody knows about the city’s most celebrated literary lights, so brightly did they shine and illuminate each other: Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Adrienne Rich, notably, among those of the late 20th century alone. Yet we should never forget their fellow luminaries, including George Starbuck, John Holmes, and Maxine Kumin, who lasted the longest of their generation, until she passed away last week at the age of 88.

It was in Holmes’s now storied workshop at the Boston Center for Adult Education that Kumin and Sexton met in 1957. “She said of me that I was the frump of frumps; I was in awe of her,” Kumin recalled years later. “She wore high heels and pancake makeup and had flowers in her hair. You could not possibly find two more different women.” It may be odd to think of such stellar poets taking an adult ed class, but when Kumin was a 17-year old Radcliffe student in the 1940s, professor Wallace Stegner (probably only in his 20s at the time) told her she was a terrible poet; responding to a sheaf of her poems on some sentimental subject or other, he wrote: “Say it with flowers, but for God’s sake don’t write any more poems about it.”

Kumin didn’t quit writing, but went on to produce light verse for such popular periodicals as The Saturday Evening Post, Good Housekeeping, Ladies’ Home Journal, the New York Herald Tribune, The Christian Science Monitor, and The Wall Street Journal. Yet she became a self-described closeted serious poet, when not figuring out how to tend to her family and hold down a part-time teaching job.

She had to write tucked away like a hermit, she said, and in a male voice, because so few women poets were taken seriously at the time: “Even at noon the attic vault is dim./ The hermit carves his own name in the sill/ that someone after will take stock of him.” The word “mentor,” she ruefully pointed out later, “was not a verb at the time.”

But Sexton and Kumin became close friends, leaving their phones connected all day and whistling into them whenever there was something about poetry to share. In time, the work of these poets, along with that of Plath, put to rest stereotypes about who could be counted a real poet. Maxine Kumin went on to receive the Pulitzer, a Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, and became poet laureate of the United States.

I met Maxine when I put together a memorial for Starbuck at Harvard a decade ago. She wasn’t well at the time, but she refused to miss the chance to deliver a tribute to her old friend. When she arrived, coming down from her farm in New Hampshire on a stormy night, it was as if she’d traversed both hell

and high water to get to Cambridge. In spite of this, the first thing I noticed was her famously wicked sense of humor, perfectly balanced with her incandescent generosity and plain, solid goodness.

Those who heard her eloquently remember those lost friends, Sexton and Starbuck, won't ever forget them, or her. Characteristically, she saw the overlapping comedy and tragedy in everything. Left almost paralyzed in a violent accident that involved her beloved horse, Deuter, she afterwards insisted: "We're best friends. I was so grateful that he wasn't hurt." She mostly recovered, something I attribute to her moral and physical courage, not to mention her formidable sense of loyalty.

By virtue of those strengths Kumin took on hard issues wherever she found them. In 1968, for example, she resigned from her position as a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets to protest the absence of minority members from its board. The twinkle in her eye could kindle into a brush fire. Of Stegner, she wryly said, "I forgave him, but by then he had died." Even on being awarded Harvard University's prestigious Arts Medal, she did not make a flowery speech, but vividly excoriated the school for its treatment of women in her day. Kumin didn't believe in the complacency of letting the past go forgotten.

The New Hampshire farm that became home to Kumin and her husband, Victor, was located near the place they had spent their honeymoon. It was amusingly nicknamed "Pobiz" and provided her with peace, quiet, and a relationship with the land — an escape from the silly business of literary folderol and what Starbuck called "thunk up" poetry. The land got into her writing so deeply that when someone called her "Roberta Frost," she accepted it as a compliment. Her sense of place sustained her and her poems, which now sustain us. "Poetry's like farming," she wrote: "It's/ a calling, it needs constancy."

And that constancy was beautifully reflected in poems about life in the country with Victor, which she lived "year/ after year we two with/ ladder and pail stained/ with the rain of grapes/ our private language."

But there was always a public language, as well, and many of her writings were political, even controversial. Reflecting on "this terrible world," feeling "such sorrow for where we are politically and socially," Kumin rejected bromides and easy spirituality; growing up in the Depression and during the Holocaust, she became an atheist at the age of 16.

She never believed in an afterlife, but in that, at least, she was wrong. Her earthy yet brightly reflective poems will remain alive as long as people look around to discover exactly where they are, and precisely what needs to be done.

Don Share is the editor of Poetry magazine.