

Maxine Kumin 1925–2014: The Long Approach: A Life in Poetry

By Eleanor Wilner
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I think I am going to get personal in this essay, because my subject is a person first, poet next, though the two, in her case, are not separable, and that inability to separate her life from her poems will be very much my subject, as it was hers. I shall call her Max, because that is what I called her. Though my poems are about as different from hers as poems can be, some of her books have fallen apart in my hands from referring back to them, and some of her poems— a memorable line whose music catches home truth, an image that strikes deep— are wound like strong cords of hemp through my memory in such a way that, pull one thread, the whole thing shimmers.

And I think this essay needs to be informal, at home with memory, ruminative. Like ruminant animals who literally chew things over, so do we return, again and again to muse on certain things, as I, over these many years, return to her poetry, to enjoy and for yet another serious look. [1]Max's own intimate assimilation into the lives of the animals she'd raised, rescued and lived with is reflected in her poems by this metaphoric resemblance between viscera and vision, and is certainly what brings it to mind for me.

And even as, for the final fermentation of difficult to digest material, the bacteria are crucial, just so what is often despised and considered alien is necessary in the creative transformation of material. So the originally indigestible is made digestible and its nutrients released into the bloodstream to nourish life. The rest: well, that's manure, and it helps the next generation of grass grow. As Max wrote of her own valuation of natural process in "The Excrement Poem":

I think these things each morning with shovel
And rake, drawing the risen brown buns
Toward me, fresh from the horse oven, as it were.

Or, at the end of that poem: "I honor shit for saying: We go on." After all, as her poems remind us, death feeds the growing world, even as manure helps produce the next season's flowers. Besides, it is evidence of nature's excellent discrimination of what nourishes us, and what, though waste to us, might nourish another kind of organism. Would that we all had such fine detectors.

Max wrote, 25 years ago, of "the newly dead red squirrel" done in by her barn cats Abra and Cadabra: "I bury what I deplore // in the manure pile, deep in that warm brown / digester to be flung next fall on the meadow, / then let myself down rung by rung into /

the green well of losses, a kitchen midden // where the newly dead layer by layer // overtake the long and longer vanished.” “We have art,” said Nietzsche, “in order not to die of the truth.” “I’m very fond of that statement,” said Max, and her art was poetry; it let her live her life with open eyes.

“Poetry is my life,” she wrote. “The steady and gradual accretion of poems is inherent now. I could no more do without it than breakfast.” No poet has more closely woven poetry into her daily life, a poetry that is personal but never confessional; she guarded her privacy and that of her three children and husband of nearly 70 years with the clear knowledge that though there was nothing to hide, there was plenty to protect.

What her art, as affectionate as it was astringent, required— first and last— was form: for her, formal prosody was essential; it was enabling. She says of this:

The tougher the form the easier it is for me to handle the poem, because form gives permission to be very gut honest about feelings. The curious thing for me is that rhyme makes me a better poet. Invariably I feel it does. This is a mystic notion, and I’m not by any stretch a mystic, but it’s almost as though I’m not capable of the level of language and metaphor that form enables me to achieve.

I have always thought of her poems, and not just for the ring of the phrase, as études of finitude. It was Chopin who turned the étude from an exercise that hones a technical skill to an art in itself, a virtuoso piece illustrating the intrinsic relations between technique and expressive power. The mortal exercise that Max’s études enact combines technical virtuosity with the existential skill of living within limits, and with loss, consciously inhabiting a natural system that draws its renewable energy out of the continuous death of its creatures.

Her poem “The Green Well” exemplifies how she saw insight rather than reduction in viewing our own grieving memory of losses as a kitchen midden, that outdoor dump for domestic waste— bones, shells, rinds, excrement, and other kinds of offal. In this poem, quoted below, the kitchen midden functions as an unsentimental metaphor drawn from her everyday world— poetry, “pulled up,” as she said, “out of the well of the commonplace.”

The Green Well

June. 5 a.m. Before the sun retakes
its dips and humps, light rims the field
with an aura. Gnats form an ectoplasmic cloud
over the bruised bathtub, over the salt lick

hollowed out by tongues, like medieval stairs
petitioners' feet have worn, looking for truth.
I hold truth in a Nine Lives can twice
weekly for the cats, whose paws explore

the lips and sills of stalls so deftly that
they need never encounter the grounded dogs.
Today a newly dead red squirrel hugs
the top of the feed bin, recompense exact.

Thanks, Abra. Thank you, Cadabra, for
doing God's work— fledglings, field mice, shrews,
moles, baby rabbits— else why would He
have made so many? I bury what I deplore

in the manure pile, deep in that warm brown
digester to be flung next fall on the meadow,
then let myself down rung by rung into
the green well of losses, a kitchen midden

where the newly dead layer by layer
overtake the long and longer vanished. Gone
now to tankage my first saved starveling mare
and the filly we tore from her in the rain.

After the lethal phenobarb, the vet
exchanged my check for his handkerchief.
Nine live foals since and I'm still pocked with grief,
with how they lay on their sides, half dry, half wet . . .

Grief, Sir, is a species of idleness,
a line we treasured out of Bellow, my
suicided long-term friend and I.
All these years I've fought somehow to bless
her drinking in of the killer car exhaust

but a coal of anger sat and winked its live
orange eye undimmed in my chest
while the world buzzed gossiping in the hive.

That mare a dangerous runaway, her tongue
thickly scarred by wire. My friend too
fleeing her wolves, her voices those voodoo
doctors could not still nor save her from . . .

The cats clean themselves after the kill.
A hapless swallow lays another clutch
of eggs in the accessible nest. It does
not end with us, not yet, though end it will.

Metric composition becomes the formal container here for the decomposition of the natural world— quatrains, a variable pentameter, and a rhyme scheme disguised in mostly slant rhymes, as in stanza 1: the dominant final consonant “k” provides the envelope echoes:retakes/lickand the internal couplet echoes on final d’s:field/cloud. But as the subject grows more intimately painful when the lost “we” enters with the sharp irony of the quoted line, “grief, Sir, is a species of idleness,”[2]and raises the ghost of her close friend Anne Sexton— whose suicide her poetry works at again and again— so the form grows more strict to give her enough distance to handle it, formal distance paradoxically permitting such closeness to what hurts.

Indigestible that death, more so than the others, and her poems return to it, over and over, for years. Notice how form hardens to handle it: the end rhymes of stanzas 7 through 11 grow more exact as death touches her directly: first with the euthanasia of a beloved, rescued mare, then, in stanza 8: when “we treasured” raises Anne’s ghost: idleness/bless; my and I; until every stanza has one pair of exact rhymes: live/hive; too/voodoo; and the clincher: kill and will, as the poem moves from her locale to the larger sphere— the Earth, we now know, will not abide forever.

We can notice, too, how the projection of human morality onto nature is sharply mocked in the cats’ instinctive killing of the squirrel and all the casual slaughters of nature: “Thank you, Cadabra, for / doing God’s work— fledglings, field mice, shrews, / baby rabbits— else why would He have made so many?” Nature is what it is, and what it is does not answer to our desires or our human notions of justice. And, as this passage makes clear, it is cruel to think so.

Max was a skeptic par excellence, aware of mythmaking, of how we populate the inexplicable with gods in our own image. The end of another poem has stayed with me

since its publication thirty years ago. The poem, “A Distant Grandchild Listens to Farm Sounds,” imagines the distant child hearing these familiar sounds, “waiting for Grandpa to step out of the cassette.” It describes taking the tape recorder to the barns, catching for the boy the sounds of the animals, the actions of Grandpa:

The rain of his hammer, the scrape of his shovel,
the pitch of his whistle calling
the dog to his side, the horses from pasture.
The child has learned this language
while still awaiting his idol.
This is it, this nonappearance.
This is how gods are made.

Hers was the world of presence, of the actual: she spoke always in the language of the body; the choice of words is a diction decidedly Anglo-Saxon— the Germanic-descended language of peasants and pig farmers in England, not the Latin of Church and university, or the Romance-language French of the court. The Latinate words in English, more elevated, more distanced from the sweat of bodily life, are seldom found in her poems, whose diction, over time, grew ever more plain. “My work,” she said in an interview when she was in her 80s, “has gotten bonier over the last ten years. I’ve always had a narrative thread, but my poems are tougher, more focused . . . they use fewer adjectives. The poet’s investment in the material is what makes a poem memorable.”

Max always lived actively in her body— a competition swimmer and water ballet adept in her youth, swimming remained a constant of her life, as did riding the horses she rescued and bred; both activities make the body a part of another, larger body— of water, of the horse— and both, like writing, require discipline, form, pacing and endurance. Body and mind were so conjoined in her that her life on the farm always provided imaginative fodder: the metaphors for her inner life, dreams and musings. She was impatient of abstractions, and forbade them to her students.

Before arthritis set in, and the riding accident that broke her neck and many of her bones, but from which, miraculously but painfully, she recovered, she always traveled to her poetry gigs with her lightweight saddle, with plans to find a local horse to ride; the saddle had its own case, and when asked about this ungainly object, she often said it was a tuba. (On the other hand, when asked by strangers what she did, she’d say she raised horses, because if she said she was a poet, almost invariably, the rejoinder would be “Ever published anything?”) Her one unvarying requirement when traveling was a room with a window that actually opened.

One of her best known poems for its marriage of metric measure and bodily pleasure, the body's motion and formal prosody perfectly matched, is "Morning Swim," from back in 1965, in her second book, *The Privilege*; the form imitates the hymn she hums, her four-beat lines, end rhymed as couplets, a regular and noticeable pattern, purposely heightened as it enjoys its easy swing— especially where the syntax agrees with the rhyme to end the lines:

Into my empty head there come
a cotton beach, a dock where from

I set out, oily and nude
through mist, in chilly solitude.

There was no line, no roof or floor
to tell the water from the air.

Night fog thick as terry cloth
Clothed me in its fuzzy growth.

I hung my bathrobe on two pegs,
I took the lake between my legs.

Invaded and invader, I
went overhand on that flat sky.

Fish twitched beneath me, quick and tame,
In their green zone they sang my name
and in the rhythm of the swim
I hummed a two-four-time slow hymn,

I hummed Abide with Me. The beat
rose in the fine thrash of my feet,
rose in the bubbles I put out
slantwise, trailing through my mouth.

My bones drank water, water fell
through all my doors. I was the well
that fed the lake that met my sea
in which I sang Abide with Me.

I think here of how far most of our urban and electronic lives have drifted from the intimate knowledge of what we are: thinking animals. Maxine Kumin lived inside of and celebrated that biological condition, free of attitude, shame or illusion about it— while letting art keep her from dying of too much truth. And speaking of too much truth, for the first time in many years, her new book of poems, *And Short the Season*, published last year, 2014, the same year as her death, arrived, this time without that little card from Norton tucked under the dust jacket saying: “This Book comes with the Compliments of the Author.” I think that’s when her death came home to me, literally, through the mail slot with a thud as the book hit the floor. In that book, written in her late 80s, was a poem that suggests just how fitting is the solid sound of that arrival of a hard truth.

As you read the poem below, notice how the first part— dealing with philosophic ideas and barely imaginable, counterintuitive facts— uses what we’ve just seen as uncharacteristic diction, i.e., Latinate words like eprocession, gradually, expiring, negligible, galaxy and so on; while the diction goes Anglo-Saxon as reality gains weight and comes down to earth.

Either Or

Death, in the orderly procession
of random events on this gradually
expiring planet crooked in a negligible
arm of a minor galaxy adrift among
millions of others bursting apart in
the amnion of space, will, said Socrates,
be either a dreamless slumber without end
or a migration of the soul from one place
to another, like the shadow of smoke rising
from the backroom woodstove that climbs
the trunk of the ash tree outside
my window and now that the sun is up
down come two red squirrels and a nuthatch.
Later we are promised snow.
So much for death today and long ago.

The description of the real weight of things, of the world in which we have our bodily lives, is enhanced by the way the accents fall: the fine hopes of Socrates have as little weight as “the shadow of smoke rising through the trees,” and with light (“now that the

sun is up”) comes the solid truth carried in prosody’s most emphatic metric deviation: the spondee— usually two strong stresses falling consecutively. Here there’s an amazing quintuple spondee— five stressed syllables in a row: dÓwn cÓme twÓ rÉd squÍrrels . . . gravity’s meter for sure “. . . and a nuthatch”— a bird after all, a bit lighter an arrival, but no less solid. And then comes the final rhyming couplet, the cold to come, then the last line: bare of image and, though filling out the form, going limp in meter, “So much for death today, and long ago,” purposely a throwaway line, dismissing astrophysics, Socrates, and all else that is, to the farmer/poet, and really, to most of us— so much smoke.

“Real nature,” says poet/critic Neal Bowers with reference to Max’s poetry, “is neither allegory nor paradigm . . . it is the realm where things mean themselves.” To which I’d add: “and mean everything.” There is no ideal world or imaginary realm or state of being to which the actual, everyday one is compared and thus dimmed and diminished in the comparison. Again, Bowers, in his perceptive essay “Poised in the Galloping Moment,”[3] comments: “Kumin’s poetry is as clear as a spring-fed well . . . Nothing has been more difficult for scholars in our age than dealing with work of this kind . . .” Bowers goes on to say: “Resembling the natural world it powerfully evokes, Kumin’s poetry is at once accessible and profound.” She wanted her poems accessible, and she said so. She was impatient with what she called “creeping exegesis . . . dissecting the poor poem until it wriggles around and is eventually killed.” Notice the poem’s active struggle under what she saw as the devouring critic’s analytic eye: it “wriggles around.” What she described is not dissection, it is vivisection, revealing that for her the poem was not just about life, it was a living thing.

One of the great mysteries is how people become who they become, especially when it is a model they were not given. It seems improbable that Max, raised urban and bourgeois, should spend her chosen life, once her children were grown, on a remote, hardscrabble farm in New Hampshire that she and her husband Victor created with their labor, clearing pastures, raising gardens and horses, mucking out stables and sharing the straw with laboring mares to help bring their foals into the world. They called the farm PoBiz because whatever money Max could make as a circuit riding poet went into it. Both the farm and the poetry were much the result of unusual discipline— what she called her Jewish/Calvinist work ethic. And she fell in love with horses and felt called to that life— but why? Inexplicable these unlikely decisions that make a life: it is more than nature and nurture, and more even than chance— though luck plays a leading role in most of our lives, whatever our choices.

I think, being a pawnbroker’s daughter, she understood the power of luck better than most people, as well as the reality behind affluence, the mostly invisible fact that wealth generally comes at a price to someone else. The banker, the stockbroker, and so on, create

wealth in what is, more or less, an abstract way, protected from the actual humans on whom their actions impinge. In her poem from an early book, “The Pawnbroker,” she wrote: “I grew up under the sign of those three gold balls / turning clockwise on their swivel. // Every good thing in my life was secondhand. / It smelled of having been owned before me by / a redcap porter whose ticket / ran out. I saw his time slip down the sand / in the glass that measured our breakfast eggs.”

In “Looking for Luck in Bangkok,” from her 1992 book, *Looking for Luck*, this exchange becomes the subject of the title poem, and, characteristically for her, it is an animal, an elephant, who carries the burden of meaning, whose bad luck is her good fortune.

Looking for Luck in Bangkok

Often at markets I see
people standing in line
to walk under an elephant.
They count out a few coins,
then crouch to slip beneath
the wrinkly umbrella that smells
of dust and old age
and a thousand miracles.

They unfold on the other side
blessed with long life,
good luck, solace from grief,
unruly children, and certain
liver complaints.

Conspicuous Caucasian,
I stoop to take my turn.
The feet of my elephant are stout
as planted pines. His trunk completes
this honest structure,
this tractable, tusked,
and deeply creased
endangered shelter.

I squat in his aromatic shade
reminded of stale bedclothes,
my mother's pantry shelves
of cloves and vinegar,

as if there were no world of drought,
no parasites, no ivory poachers.
My good luck running in
as his runs out.

The poem needs no gloss, but I do want to mention how much form there is in what appears to be simply free verse. The lines have a limit of variation, mostly lines of three or four stresses that fall naturally on the key words: “blésed with lóng lífe, / goód lúck, sólace from griéf, / unrúly children . . . ,” then, as the syntax slides over the line break, notice how lightly and unimportantly the accents fall on “and certain / liver complaints.” That’s the kind of small move that sonically underlines meaning, an example that mocks the promised blessing from the shelter of this poor captive elephant, who “smells of dust and old age.”

The rhyme element here is internal and depends on assonance and consonance, mostly the latter. The k sound emphatically patterns the first stanza: markets/walk/count/coins/crouch/wrinkly/miracles. The elephant’s shape and sturdiness and fate are carried in the truncated (sorry!) lines and hard consonants of p, d, and b that begin and end 15 different words. And sonic resemblance heightens meaning as the stressed– **e**l syllable in elephant reappears in **u**mbrella, **s**mells, **m**iracles, **s**helter and **s**helves. And notice how the Latinate multisyllabic “Conspicuous Caucasian” sticks out of the plain diction of the rest of the poem just as she does in the Bangkok crowd.

Even as the well-stocked pantry shelves of her childhood immediately bring on their opposite: a world of drought, parasites, ivory poachers– so does her plenty carry with it awareness of the misery and want of the other. A kind of ethical sensitivity to the injustice of circumstance runs through her poems, an alertness to our common plight, and to the condition of others. “After the Harvest,” written ten years earlier, opens with these lines: “Pulling the garden I always think / of starving to death, of how it would be to get by / on what the hard frost left untouched / at the end of the world . . . ,” and then the poem goes on to express her amazement at the belief in the Rapture and wonder at those who can dream of their own salvation as the multitudes are consumed in fire. She expresses her disdain for that narcissism writ large, a parody of religion: “this bland vision of mail-order angels / lifting born-again drivers up from behind the wheel / leaving the rest of us loose on the highways / to play out a rudderless dodgem.” The poem gets more in earnest as it goes on until, thinking of her grandchild in far-off Southeast Asia, she writes:

A child I long to see again,
growing up in a land where thousands, displaced,
unwanted, diseased, are awash in despair.
Who will put the wafer of survival on their tongues,
lift them out of the camps, restore
their villages, replant their fields, those gardens
that want to bear twelve months of the year?
Who gets Rapture?

Sidelong we catch film clips of the Tribulation
but nobody wants to measure the breadth and length
of the firestorms that lurk in Overkill,
certitude of result through overwhelming strength,
they define it in military circles,
their flyboys swirling up in sunset contrails.
The local kids suit up to bob for apples,
go trick-or-treating on both sides of Main.
November rattles its dry husks down the food chain
on this peaceable island at the top of the hill.

Her own good fortune, high at the top of the hill, is shadowed here not only by what others suffer, but how, as the penultimate stanza says, we look only “Sidelong” at the suffering caused by our military actions, as if massive violence were, like the Rapture invoked here with “Tribulation,” divinely ordained. To this subject her poems, and this essay, will return as we enter the present, but for now, let us look back, return to the history of the time when she was coming of age.

I think, by now, we have all but forgotten what obstacles a woman had to overcome to become a writer in the 1940s and '50s, and how Max not only overcame them but made way for others. A few particulars. Max attended Radcliffe in the '40s, with a BA in 1946, the same year she married Victor Kumin, then got her MA there in 1948. She said later that in all the time she was there, it simply never occurred to her that the professors were exclusively men. Her high school English had taught her scansion of meters and the prescribed forms of traditional prosody, a poetry she loved and memorized. She described the exhilaration of Radcliffe: coming from “this middle-class, materialistic environment, with its emphasis on clothes and knowing the right people, and suddenly to find myself in a community of similarly focused young women who also memorized poetry on the sly.

"We were all closet poets." Yet it was at Radcliffe that Wallace Stegner was her teacher and told her categorically to stop writing. And she did, for seven years.

In 1957 when, after those years of not writing, Max signed up for a poetry workshop with John Holmes at the Boston Center for Adult Education, where she met and bonded with Anne Sexton, there was no feminist movement, no consciousness raising groups, few models or female mentors, little support for women doing this unsuitable thing: so you can begin to understand how significant that friendship in which they took each other's work seriously, how intertwined with the growth of their poetry and their confidence as writers.

In an interview with Elaine Showalter, sixteen years into their friendship, they talked about their first public reading. Anne described her friend: "Maxine's voice was trembling so we couldn't hear her." Said Max: "I couldn't breathe." And Anne of herself: "I couldn't stand up, I was shaking so." Pre-cell phones, they had a dedicated phone line put in just so they could talk each day, read and discuss each other's poems. And in 1961, just five years after starting to write seriously, Max published her first book, Anne her first in 1960; both were prolific from then on, and Anne was an instant hit. We were all reading her back then. But her mental illness was worsening. Of her relationship to Anne's madness, Max has said: "I was hanging on to her, like the nuns who hung on to Saint Teresa's boot tops to pull her down when she levitated . . . I was trying very hard to keep her feet on the ground . . . I was just trying to root her. I was trying to keep her sane."

So pernicious, the false glamour of suicide, its drama, the utterly mistaken connection to art— which wants us whole and is the health in us; as Max said of Anne: "it was poetry that kept her alive. That I know full well." She went on to say: "There's a prurient interest, a pornography of suicide, let's face it, whether it's Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton or Hemingway or John Berryman jumping off a bridge and waving. I think we have those suicides on several counts. One, because it lets us view poets or writers as weaklings who can't withstand the vicissitudes of the life they're engaged in. Then there's the voice that says, 'That's writers, they're all crazy.' But you know, more dentists and psychiatrists kill themselves than writers."

In fact, what Maxine Kumin has come to represent in our poetry is the reality principle, a wise sanity, the middle register, the temperate zone, constancy, connectedness, and longevity, writing as a way of living, and in it for the long term: in her 18 books of poetry, she has taken us through all the stages of life, providing a model of a full life for the poet, and especially for those of us who were once taught that women poets were odd, anomalous, and single. Though writing from a woman's life and point of view, she always insisted that the act of creating is itself androgynous. Consistently, Max has been a

champion of women and the excluded and used her position of distinction as a way to publicize the inequities that condemned so many to public silence for so long.

When she was appointed as Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress in 1981, a post now called Poet Laureate, at a press luncheon, she reminded them that between 1937 and 1981, in the 44 years the position had existed, there had been only one African-American, and she was only the fifth woman. “We don’t count,” the head librarian said to the press. “We do,” Maxine replied. “We have to.” And she added, in a recent speech, “Alas, we still do.”

As recently as 1998, Max and Carolyn Kizer publicly resigned their posts as Chancellors of the American Academy of Poetry, because of its insularity, its elitism, its mostly male, white and East Coast membership. They had been trying for some time to get Lucille Clifton appointed to a vacant post as a Chancellor, but without success. Their very public resignation galvanized a new inclusivity in the Academy; Lucille Clifton was invited in; the Chancellors, ever since, no longer have 24-year terms, and more accurately represent the diversity of America’s literary voices.

Her last autobiographical essay, published in 2012 in *The Georgia Review*, “Metamorphosis: From Light Verse to the Poetry of Witness,” carries in its title what she saw as the transit of her work, registering time’s transformations.[4] She recounts how, as a restless mother of three, she began writing and publishing trendy light verse in popular magazines; it was the comic beginning of what was to serve, at least, her lifetime investment in rhyme and formal pattern. I quote from her essay, as she says of one such verse: “‘Lines on a Half-Painted House’ appeared in the *Post* in 1953:

In summer, beach and billows beckon; And in between, you
dab a speck on.

In autumn, who feels dutiful? The foliage is beautiful.

In winter, little can be done; the brush will freeze, the nose
will run.

Spring’s the time! The perfect instant! And fortunately, two
months distant.

“About these lines,” she goes on to say, “I must add this incredible detail; my husband was required to provide a letter from his employer certifying that my poem was original. This is not as far-fetched as it sounds today. In the fifties, women, along with people of color, were still thought to be intellectually inferior, mere appendages in the world of belles lettres.” Toward the end of this memoir essay, she writes, “For much of my poetic lifetime,

my focus was on the natural world, untampered with and unromanticized. But the face of violence and human cruelty eventually broke through— perhaps abetted by the fact that I have a daughter who worked for thirty-two years for the United Nations Refugee Agency.” Often her references to the cruel fate of those caught in wars and human-made catastrophes were contrasted with our own situation of privilege, as safely “sequestered” viewers of the “misery and terror” of distant others.

But more and more, the news comes home, and with it, a deep disquiet drives the poems’ increased engagement with public events. Here’s “Mulching” that opens her 2007 book, *Still to Mow*; even in her own vegetable garden, spreading newspapers between plants, she can’t help but see the terrible headlines:

Me in my bugproof netted headpiece kneeling
to spread sodden newspapers between broccolis,
corn sprouts, cabbages and four kinds of beans,

prostrate before old suicide bombings, starvation,
AIDS, earthquakes, the unforeseen tsunami,
front-page photographs of lines of people

with everything they own heaped on their heads,
the rich assortment of birds trilling on all
sides of my forest garden, the exhortations

of commencement speakers at local colleges,
the first torture revelations under my palms
and I a helpless citizen of a country

I used to love, who as a child wept when
the brisk police band bugled Hats off! The flag
is passing by, now that every wanton deed

in this stack of newsprint is heartbreak,
my blackened fingers can only root in dirt,
turning up industrious earthworms, bits

of unreclaimed eggshell, wanting to ask
the earth to take my unquiet spirit,
bury it deep, make compost of it.

For anyone close to her generation, who grew up through the WWII years, and in a more innocent America, this poem needs no gloss. In her essay, she goes on to say: “My disenchantment turned to fury as the war in Iraq gathered steam, with the appalling use of torture by the United States and its proxies, the legal maneuvering at Guantanamo, and more. Now, nearly sixty years after my first four lines of light verse were published . . . I feel that my work has truly metamorphosed into the poetry of witness, though my political poems were wrung from me . . . Thematically, these poems are linked by my despair at the monstrous contempt American officialdom has displayed for justice and morality in the years since the 9/11 attacks.” Looking back to a younger self in 1963 in Provincetown, she writes in 2012: “Who knew we would live to write the worst. / Poetry had once been love and autumn.”

Now, as I, reluctantly, approach the end of this account of a life lived in and through poetry, let us look back to its beginning. Her first book, over 50 years ago, was called *Halfway*; the title poem explains its provenance, in her early, metrically neat, rhyming tetrameter:

As true as I was born into
my mother's bed in Germantown
the gambrel house in which I grew
stood halfway up a hill, or down
between a convent and a madhouse.

And later in the poem she writes: “the plain song and the bedlam hung / on air and blew across / into the garden where I played . . .” To have lived literally as a child between these poles— the formal, unison liturgical chants of the nuns and the chaos of madness: these set the tensions of her work— the necessity for a formal order, a saving grace through language, even as nurture of animals and the garden had been a literal kind of saving in the face of mortality's constant loss— language and a life close to nature all of a piece.

In the lovely poem “Path, Chair” that opens her last book, she walks, first with the poets she has by heart (whom she always had her students memorize) and who walk with her: Yeats, Auden, Wordsworth, Hazlitt, Housman; and then, reviewing “forty years of walking the bounds of our fields,” she takes us with her, naming and describing each field and the history of labor that salvaged them. The poem ends with the chair on which she rests her much injured, aged body, where she can survey her garden, and muse on her version of salvation:

My resting place, from which I watch
the rhubarb swell, the peas inch up,
the early spinach break through clods,
a 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: 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.

And that's what naming can do, pay homage to what "we like the thought of," but know the difference between the thought and the thing. Notice the traditional line of iambic pentameter, "our catholic homage to an afterlife," is followed by the line that unsettles such belief— and that line refuses to scan: it unsettles the kind of ordered lines that precede it, signifying a loss of an old assurance of belief. And this is "catholic" with a small c, in its original sense, from the *Latincatholicus*, "universal," her word referring to a broad, inclusive tolerance of mind.

And as to that "farthest field," she describes it earlier in the poem: "Climbing again, /our outermost and final summer pasture, / The Elysian Field, dotted with granite / outcrops that invite the passerby / to pause, climb up, take in the view. . . ." The Elysian Fields, after which they named this "final summer pasture," and which is her final resting place, is a reference to the Greek fields where the happy, heroic dead could enjoy the pleasures of summer forever. And no, we don't believe in that, but how lovely the language that lets it live in the mind.

And speaking of language as saving what is lost, what did Max think about the endurance of her own poetry? Did she write, as some apparently do, with one eye on the page and one on some imagined posterity? I remember an occasion when she was asked if she thought her work would outlive her. "Well," she said, "I would like to think that maybe 50 years from now, someone will come upon a poem of mine, and think 'that's a nice example of that kind of thing.'"

At the end of a poem in her 1982 book, its title taken from the pilot's warning to the passengers, *Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief*, she writes of "Revisiting the MacDowell Colony" and considering the names of those "who signed the plaque above the hearth / as evidence of tenancy and worth." Here is the last stanza:

I strain to read above the confident fire
names of early-great and almost-great:
Rumer Godden, Padraic Colum,
Nikolai Lopatnikoff;
too many pale ones gone to smudges.
Use a penknife, I advise my friend,
then ink each letter for relief
– as if a name might matter
against the falling leaf.

But there is another kind of relief carried here, not in the hollow notoriety of a fading name– but rather the spiritual relief in the kind of precision of language and mastery of form, the "saving that is a form of worship," the words of a genuine poet whose writing life was spent trying to call things by the right name.

[1] Almost twenty years ago, I wrote an essay on her work for *Telling the Barn Swallow: Poets on the Poetry of Maxine Kumin*, ed. by Emily Grosholz (Lebanon, New Hampshire, 1997).

[2] Bellow must have quoted Dr. Johnson, while Max's memory recorded only the quoter.

[3] From *Telling the Barn Swallow*, op. cit.

[4] This essay, among others, is included in *THE PAWNBROKER'S DAUGHTER: A Memoir*, by Maxine Kumin. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. \$25.95.