

# THE NEW YORKER

Postscript: Maxine Kumin (1925-2014)

BY PHILIP SCHULTZ The New Yorker February 13, 2014

Much has been written about Maxine Kumin's remarkable poetry and prose, her great friendship and poetic partnership with Anne Sexton, and their pioneering forays into a male-dominated academic and poetic world; about her generosity to friends and students; and, maybe most important, about her love of the physical world and her two-hundred-acre farm in Warner, New Hampshire. Her accomplishments are numerous: she won a Pulitzer Prize, was Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress (today known as the Poet Laureate), wrote some seventeen books of poetry, novels, story collections, and memoirs. But her extraordinary appetite for life can also be witnessed even in the casual medium of e-mail (she and I exchanged many over the years). She had an uncanny ability to pack so much news and good feeling into one message, discussing with profound insight the local price of hay and rage at what she deemed the violent indifference to the local price of hay, weather reports ("we woke this morning to our first white world tho it's melting fast now") and news of black bear and nearsighted moose sightings. ("Great blue heron enjoying Victor's fingerlings; handsome black bear skulking amid skinny birch trees, and best of all two moose, the bull plunging into the pond, swimming halfway out then back to beach where he shook himself like a dog while antlerless companion watched the droplets fly....")

Grief is always selfish, a complaint to the gods about what has been taken from us, but the loss I feel surprises me. Maxine was eighty-eight and came close to dying just over a year ago. When I wrote asking after her, she replied, "You are sweet to write. It means a lot to me. Yes, I'm still at it – Norton is going to do new poems 'And Short the Season.' V [her husband Victor] & I happily remember all of you here on the farm. Seed catalog time, hard to believe another year, heartwarming to stay in touch."

This says a great deal about her resourcefulness and priorities ("Good, hectic days," she called her time on the farm). She always had a lot going on, right up to the time of her death last Thursday, February 6th. A new poetry collection about to appear, a young-adult novel completed, biographical essays. Life at a gallop, brimming over with appetite and, well, yes, love for a world she pretty much made for herself.

Maxine, or Max to friends and family, was nothing if not a pioneer. A Jewish woman poet at a time when it wasn't exactly fashionable to be any of those things, she knew firsthand how to make room for herself in hostile terrain. Even her farm (which she affectionately and ironically named Pobiz, after the perilous mixing of poetry and business) had to be imagined and then made out of brambles and hard labor over a period of fifty years. Her poetry represented both an alertness to and an investment in the sanctified details of the natural world, a love of the music of the commonplace. Her desire to experience and take note was unlike anyone else's I know.

I met her only a few times, but our bond was quick and irreversible and continued in e-mails. I turned to her poetry for encouragement and inspiration and never failed to find it, in lines such as these: "Every good thing in my life was secondhand." (From "The Pawnbroker.") "The typewriter bird is at it

again. / Her style is full of endearing hesitations. / The words when they come, do so in / the staccato rush of a deceitful loveletter.” (From “The Hermit Wakes to Bird Sounds.”) And when she mixed, as she often did, the lyrical with the political: “If only they’d all consented to die unseen / gassed underground the quiet Nazi way.” (From “Woodchucks.”) And in this soulful cry of outrage and incredulity (from “The Selling of Slaves”):

In the vestry flasks go round. The gavel’s  
report is a hollow gunshot:  
sold, old lady! and the hot  
manure of fear perfumes God’s chapel.

Why this great outpouring from a city girl from Philadelphia, the daughter of a Jewish pawnbroker who somehow managed to get to Radcliffe and then make her way into the poetic heart of an American century? Unlike her pobiz pals Sexton and Plath and their great teacher, Robert Lowell, she was never really confessional, unless confiding truths discovered in nature would serve as a definition. “We are feeding about 30 goldfinches at a time, still some redpolls lingering, both downy & hairy woodpeckers but we never get cardinals, my favorite birds. They like more open spaces, as do orioles tho they come by when the ancient appletrees bloom, then depart.” As if all she had to do was think of a subject and memory and praise would begin their bottomless river flow. In her e-mails, she wrote with urgency and invention about everything from the Holocaust years to goldfinches. “Right now I am trying to finish what started as a little frothy essay about how we got our farm in 1963 & has turned into a 12 thou word biography of a place. It just doesn’t want to end.”

She didn’t want to, either. A formalist by training, she enjoyed mixing strict form with the effervescent surprises of free verse, just to shake things up a little. “I agreed to do something for the Folger, which is planning a ‘Shakespeare’s Sisters’ event for next spring, echt feminist, and came down with a sonnet virus. 9 so far & Im not done. Theyre loose: one in couplets, one octave/sestet, other variations, all heavily slant rhymed. Im calling them Sonnets Uncorseted.” And when her beloved horse died. “Sad news is that we had to have Boomer euthanized on Feb. 11. She went down during the night & couldn’t get up tho she struggled to do so mightily to the end. Suzy & I sat with her – it was 4 above – for almost 2 hours till the vet could get there.”

Perhaps there is something confessional here, intimacy conveyed along with the hard facts of keenly felt and observed loss—she once said, in fact, that all poetry was elegy, a celebration of and inveighing against loss. Her love and respect for animals, her devotion to life, certainly reveals a great deal about her and our immersion in the world. Permit me to be selfish again, sharing her words in order to keep them close. These lines from “The Long Approach,” from her collection of the same title: “...my life loose as a frog’s / I try to decipher the meaning of hope rising up again / making music in me all the way from Scranton / where the slag heaps stand like sentries shot dead / at their posts. Hope rising up in my Saab hatchback, / one hundred thousand honest miles on it as I speed / due north from LaBell’s cut-rate autopark / to my spiny hillside farm in New Hampshire.” Ending with this stanza:

O brace me, my groom. Pray for calm winds.  
Carry me back safely where the snow stands deep in March.  
I’m going home the old way with a light hand on the reins  
making the long approach.