She's at home in the hills

By MIKE PRIDE
Monitor editor
Sunday, June 5, 2005

Not five minutes from Interstate 89, you head up the hill on a bumpy dirt road and pass a hand-painted sign nailed to a tree. The sign says Pobiz Farm. In a moment you are there, in a clearing, where the road squeezes between an airy farmhouse and a barn and paddock.

It was on this hill 43 years ago that Maxine Kumin, poet in the making, had a revelation. That is perhaps too strong a word to apply to an atheist who guards her emotions, but let us just say that Kumin knew, without knowing why she knew, that she had found the place she was looking for.

Tomorrow morning in that place, after a short night's sleep, Kumin will awaken to her 80th birthday. It is a milestone that finds her increasingly aware of her mortality but treating it as an uninvited guest. She intends to die on her own farm in her own time.

Kumin was doubtful last year when her children insisted that she spend more time than usual in Florida during the winter. She dutifully went to Sanibel Island for eight weeks. It was warm, but it was Florida, and she missed Pobiz Farm. She vows she won't go for so long again.

It is not merely age that has crept into Kumin's regimen. In an accident while driving a horse carriage in 1998, she broke her neck and 11 ribs and suffered serious internal injuries. Mostly recovered now, she has nevertheless had to promise her family she will no longer take four-hour horseback rides in the Mink Hills around the farm.

But the tone in which she speaks of this concession suggests that because it wasn't her idea, she cannot quite accept it. She knows she must keep the promise, but she has always been stubborn. As a girl, she was a competitive swimmer, and she sometimes came to the dinner table with wet hair. Her father cherished triumphs of the mind, not the body. They argued. To this day, Maxine swims.

There is also the matter of an 80-year-old writing poetry. Kumin thought she might be ready to give it up, but then late last year her book Jack and Other New Poems came out. The book contained many strong and dark poems made with plain language that any close reader could grasp. There was a hint of the formalism she has long admired, but just a hint.

The best poems in Jack owed much to the liberating idea she first recognized 60 years ago in the work of Karl Shapiro. This was the idea that you could make a poem out of your own experience, and almost any experience -in Shapiro's case, the racism that was second nature on a southern college campus but also something as simple as a drug store or even a Buick.

If Jack's strengths weren't enough to sink the notion that it was time to retire as a poet, new poems kept coming after the book went to the printer. This is how it is with Kumin: Writing poems is as natural to her as breathing. Not easy, but natural. The poem starts with a few phrases, often inspired by an event, and soon she is scribbling new phrases, and before long she is pounding the phrases into form.

Kumin's place in the art and her sense of herself are hard won. She remembers when 'You write like a man' was supposed to be a compliment. As late as Up Country, the book that won her the 1973 Pulitzer Prize, she was writing from a male persona. In one series for that book, the hermit poems, the hermit is a man. Kumin was the hermit, but she did not believe readers would accept a female hermit.

She first became aware of what she was up against in the literary world as a 17-year-old freshman at Radcliffe in 1942. She gave a sheaf of sonnets she had written to a young instructor named Wallace Stegner, hoping for a constructive response. He wrote across the top, 'Say it with flowers, but for God's sake don't write any more poems about it.' These words turned Kumin into a closet poet for years.

She began to re-emerge in the 1950s as a writer of light verse for the slicks -Ladies'Home Journal, the Saturday Evening Post. Then she took a poetry workshop and began a friendship with a fellow student, Anne Sexton, that lasted until Sexton's suicide in 1974. They were suburban mothers who became so absorbed in their poetry that they had extra phone lines installed and kept their connection open all day. Whenever one had a line to bounce off the other, she whistled into the phone. Kumin developed an ear for Sexton's whistle.

The women's movement also changed Kumin's life. Today, her voice quakes when she admits that she once took 'You write like a man' as praise. 'Male Privilege,' in Jack, takes a wicked swing at those bad old days. To Kumin and other women who once choked on the stifling air of a male-dominated literary tradition, the winds of change brought not just artistic freedom but also an invitation to discover and share who they really were. The female experience became part of the story.

Isolation

Pobiz Farm is the place where Kumin grew into herself. She and her husband Victor had honeymooned at Highland Lake in East Andover in 1946, and they decided to look for their own place in New Hampshire in 1962. They lived in Newton, Mass., and Maxine was teaching, writing and mothering.

They looked at three places before Kumin had her revelation. What they found at the top of the hill in Warner was a caved-in barn and a house that needed a new roof. The land was uncleared, more than 100 acres of it. An artist who had lived there had left behind several awful oil paintings. Victor and Maxine had just inherited $5,000 each, and the $11,500 they paid for the place kept them nearly within their budget.

In trying to say just what it was she loved about the farm on the hill, the word Kumin kept coming back to was isolation. She wanted a place where she could be alone. She needed an escape from suburbia and the noise of modern life.

The farm was also one step further removed from her past. Her early life in Philadelphia, where her father was a successful pawnbroker, had been comfortable even during the Depression. But her parents wanted a daughter with conventional aspirations who cared greatly about how she looked and dressed. Maxine was not that daughter, and her parents did not hide their disappointment.

Distance from her parents is a recurring theme in her poems. In one, she mused about her mother: 'If daughters were traded among the accessories / in the perfumed hush of Bonwit Teller's / she'd have replaced me with a pocketbook, / snapped me shut and looped me over / her Hudson seal cuff.' Poetic references to her father can be tender, but their relationship remained unreconciled even in her dreams of him after his death. She called him 'The Spoiler' in one poem, and he played the same role in many others. A man fond of aphorisms, he liked to say, 'Never buy land on a hill.'

Kumin is aware of the paradox of her life on the farm. Nature was reclaiming the place when she and Victor bought it, but their evolving vision of it, and their money and labor, stayed nature's hand. Their arrival was thus a return to nature with the intent of redirecting nature.

Maxine and Victor had a pond dug with a shady side for picnics, sunning and reading. On its edge they left a boulder in place above deep water where Maxine could dive in for her daily swim. Victor, an engineering consultant, oversaw the restoration of the old cow barn and the design and building of stalls that would one day house six horses.

The Kumins' daughter Judith took to riding, and this rekindled her mother's own girlhood love of horses. The Kumins had a pasture cleared, and then another and another. Victor dug hundreds of postholes, made the rails, put up the fences. They created a riding ring. They bought more land until they had 200 acres, and they helped cut and maintain riding trails back into the Mink Hills.

And thus while the life cycles on the farm turned to nature's commands, the farm became an extension of Maxine and Victor, a mirror of their caring for the place and their passions in life. As their children grew up, they used the place as a weekend retreat. In 1976, they moved north for good.

Pobiz Farm, named half in jest for whatever ventures poets undertake to make money, also acquired a literary life. It provided a natural narrative foundation for Kumin's poetry. It gave her the seasons, the wild, the fruits of the earth and the lives of her animals. Hornflies, marsh marigolds and 'wild fox grapes wickedly high' buzzed and blossomed into her lines, arriving not as the remote pastoral jottings of the poet as amateur naturalist but as familiar things, named, alive and real.

Fields of green

If you visit Kumin on a rainy day in May, you will enter the house through a porch where corn seedlings struggle to grow under fluorescent lamps. Maxine will tell you with apologies for sounding like a culinary snob that the beets she and Victor grow taste nothing like the beets you buy in a jar at the grocery store. After days of eating fresh asparagus from the garden, she bristles at the idea that anyone could put Hollandaise sauce on them.

She will tell you the histories of the horses she and Victor took in, all rescue animals, and in vain she will admonish her dog Virgil to stop nuzzling your crotch. In the natural order of Pobiz Farm, the animals do not run the place, but they are allowed their instincts.

On a nicer day, on a walk out into the pastures, Victor will explain all the improvements the Kumins have made over the years, and Maxine will introduce you to the two remaining horses, 23-year-old Deuter and 29-year-old Boomer. With face masks to protect them against the black flies, the horses

will follow you out of their cool stalls and into the sunny fields of green. Victor will mention the care you must take in spring to see that the horses switch slowly from winter hay to richer grass, and Maxine will watch them leave one pasture for the next and disappear, living the good life of Pobiz Farm.

A few years ago, when Maxine was fighting back from the accident that nearly killed her, she herself walked round and round the riding ring. It was eight laps to the mile, and as she walked, she committed to memory some poems from A.E. Housman's The Shropshire Lad. She had always loved Housman's work for its metrical tightness. Now, though she misses her long jaunts on the back trails, she sometimes rides around the ring.

Equestrian, swimmer, scholar, teacher, gentlewoman farmer, wife, poet - this is Maxine Kumin at 80. She and Victor and the horses are growing old together, but the season is warm and new, the raspberries and the summer squash and the pole beans will come, the poems will come, and she will cling as fiercely to her farm on the hill as she does to life itself.