

Maxine Kumin, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, dies at 88

By MIKE PRIDE

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Maxine Kumin knew what she was looking for. “A little island on top of hill” was the way she put it during an interview nine years ago. She found it in Warner – a rundown farm on land thick with brush and brambles. Over the years, through cash and hard labor, she and her husband, Victor, turned Pobiz Farm into a 200-acre paradise with pastures for their horses, a man-made pond for skinny-dipping and gardens where Maxine grew asparagus, corn and tomatoes.

In turn, the farm transformed Kumin into the poet she wanted to be. “I loved the isolation,” she said. Free of the urban and suburban lives she knew, she began to see the natural world around her and to plumb the restless world within her. Soon, she said, “I was writing more intimately about what I saw and what I felt. And little by little the language that I used changed.” It became less academic and more muscular.

Kumin died Thursday at the age of 88, following, in her family’s words, “a period of increasing frailty.” She leaves 17 books of poems written beginning in 1963, when she and Victor bought the farm for \$11,500. Along the way she served as U.S. poet laureate and won the Pulitzer Prize and the Los Angeles Times Book Award. Late in life, she continued to publish new poems long after she first swore she was finished writing them.

She also taught, wrote essays, short stories, novels, children’s books and memoirs. A 1999 memoir, *Inside the Halo and Beyond: The Anatomy of a Recovery*, described her long slow comeback after a horrific 1998 horse carriage accident.

She was first assigned to hospice care in the summer of 2012, but her health soon took a turn for the better. The poems kept coming month after month. Her last poetry collection, *And Short the Season*, is due out in early spring. As in much of her later work, this new book contains many poems in which she took what she knew was a last look around at the life she and Victor had made for themselves on Pobiz Farm. This is from the title poem:

*And short the season , first rubythroat
in the fading lilacs, alyssum in bloom,
a honeybee bumbling in the bleeding heart
on my gelding’s grave while beetles swarm
him underground. Wet feet, wet cuffs,
little flecks of buttercup on my sneaker toes,
bluets, violets crowding out the tufts*

*of rich new grass the horses nose
and nibble like sleepwalkers held fast –
brittle beauty – might this be the last?*

The poem is typical of Kumin's mature work: an irregular but rhythmic beat, the subtle alliterative pounding of those b's – bloom, bee, bumbling, bleeding, beetles, buttercup, bluets, brittle beauty, the appeal to the senses rather than the intellect, concrete imagery, all leading to a final line thought that clenches like a fist: Might this be the last?

As a poet-in-the-making, Kumin learned to love classical poetic forms. Her first model was the Anglo-American poet W.H. Auden. "No one quite matches Auden's ability to combine metaphor with anguished political statement – 'In the nightmare of the dark, all the dogs of Europe bark,'" she said. Over the years she often experimented with more exotic forms, but what she liked about any form was that it became a mold in which to shape a poem.

The freedom to write poems about whatever she chose evolved slowly. Karl Shapiro's 1942 *Person, Place, and Thing* showed her that poems needn't be confined to classical themes. Shapiro wrote about a Buick, a drugstore, racism on campus. "Anything contemporary can be the stuff of poetry," Kumin said. "You can write a poem about a fly – 'hideous little thing the size of snot.' I didn't know you could make poems out of this material."

In the 1950s, with a happy marriage, three young children and a home in Newton, Mass., Kumin kept her literary aspirations alive by writing light verse for *Ladies' Home Journal* and other such magazines. At a poetry workshop she met Anne Sexton, and a writing friendship began. The two had extra phones installed in their houses and left the line open so they could talk at any time about their works in progress or any other subject.

Sexton was a confessional poet, Kumin was not. Nevertheless, Sexton reinforced Kumin's notion that nothing – certainly not personal experience – was off-limits for a poet. "She helped me to open up in ways that I might not have achieved on my own," Kumin wrote. She also gave Kumin the title for *Up Country*, the book that won the Pulitzer Prize.

Sexton lost a long battle with mental illness one afternoon in 1974. After having lunch with Kumin to go over a manuscript, she poisoned herself with carbon monoxide. The suicide remained a painful memory for the rest of Kumin's life. "I think about it constantly," she told me in 2004. "It's very fresh. I don't think it will ever fade. I think I have finally forgiven her."

Until nearly the end of her life, when interviewers asked where poems came from, Kumin pleaded uncertainty. Will and intention were never the whole answer. Her muse had a mind of its own. In March 2012, her wry poem "Truth" ran in the *New Yorker* 55 years after the magazine first published her. Rebecca Foresman, the assistant poetry editor, asked about its origins. Kumin answered that she was just playing with a metaphor – "unvarnished truth" – and "didn't expect it to turn into a poem. One never knows."

She did make a discovery of another kind during her last years, when the 575 wartime letters she and Victor wrote were found in the attic at Pobiz Farm. She was a student at Radcliffe during World War II,

a rich Philadelphia girl with a love of words. Victor was a soldier working on the lenses for the atomic bomb as part of the Manhattan Project. The letters provided a window into their time, and Maxine wrote about them for *The American Scholar* in the autumn 2012 edition. The letters, the last the couple wrote to each other, are now deposited with the rest of Kumin's papers at the Beinecke Library at Yale University.

Kumin had strong beliefs. She loved stray horses and dogs without qualification, usually preferring them to human beings. She was a gardener, an atheist and a peacenik. She thought her poetry should speak truth to George W. Bush and Dick Cheney about torture. She thrilled at the sprouting of the first seeds on her porch each spring and savored the taste of homegrown vegetables. She memorized many poems so she would have them when she needed them, as she did during her recovery from the carriage accident.

The book that won the Pulitzer Prize included a series of poems about a hermit who was male. The hermit was Kumin, but she did not think at the time a female hermit could be a credible character. When she spoke of this in later life, it was hard to believe such a tough-minded feminist could ever have made such a concession. On the other hand, she knew how to command an old-fashioned deference from her male friends.

The Concord Public Library honored Kumin's work this past fall by choosing her for the annual Concord Reads program. Kumin was too ill to read or participate in the events. Friends read in her place. One poem read at the main event was "Ascending," with its gentle bow to Robert Frost's "After Apple-Picking":

*The grapes just forming are green beads
as tight on the stalk as if hammered into place,
the swelling unripe juveniles are almost
highest burgundy, promising yet withholding
and the ones they have come for, the highest
blue-black clusters wearing a dusting of white,
veiled dancers, tantalize in the wind.
Wrens weaving in and out, small bugs, pale sun.
Two bony old people / the back forty,
one holding the ladder, one ascending.*

The two bony old people are, of course, Maxine and Victor, who is 92. As she wished, she died at her farmhouse on the hillside under the care of loving hands. Outside her room, winter whitened the rural landscape of her years of labor. Now her voice is stilled, but the poems she came to New Hampshire to harvest remain.