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Maxine Kumin, Jack and Other New Poems (2005); In Deep: Country Essays (1987)

b. June 6, 1925, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Maxine Kumin, whose work has spanned nearly fifty years, is one of America's most important poets. For the last three decades, she has written from the perspective of her Warner, New Hampshire farm, recording her life there in poetry and prose even as she ranges widely across a full range of American subjects, such as the conflicts of human cultural and religious identity, connections to the natural world, especially animals, in a post-modern era, family, war, politics, a sense of loss, and women's lives. Kumin's life work embodies the passage of the twentieth century, and she is a sure guide to this landscape of human dreams and disasters. In staking her ground in New Hampshire, she joins a tradition of writers who have observed human civilization from such rural retreats, a tradition stretching back into biblical and classical times. She enters conversation with those who preceded her in New England, including Thoreau and Frost, but she is best compared to her contemporaries, Gary Snyder, Mary Oliver, and Wendell Berry, who have also gone against the current of what Kumin has called "poe-biz" to create individual ethics and aesthetics. In her latest volume, Jack and Other New Poems, Kumin has written some of the best poems of her career, showing that at age 80, and as a survivor of a great generation of poets, she has something new and important to say.

Maxine Kumin was born in Philadelphia, raised in a Reformed Jewish tradition but educated as a child in Catholic schools. While a student at Radcliffe College, she met Victor Kumin, whom she married in 1946. Over the next decade, the Kumins had three children, but she felt "acutely miserable" in this 1950s female domesticity. Joining a poetry workshop in 1957, she quickly became friends with another poet, Anne Sexton, and the two collaborated on children's books and critiqued and encouraged each other's writing until Sexton's death in 1974. With the publication of Halfway in 1961, Kumin soon became a leading American poet, often identified with and compared to others in her generation, such as Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, John Berryman, and Adrienne Rich. Author of dozens of volumes of poetry, fiction, children's books (several coauthored with Anne Sexton), and non-fiction, Maxine Kumin won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1973 for Up Country: Poems of New England, New and Selected (1972). Other awards and honors include appointment as the poetry consultant to the Library of Congress, in 1981-82, and Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, 1995-98, a post she resigned to protest the Academy's lack of diversity. She has taught and lectured at many colleges and universities over the past fifty years. Kumin's life took a decisive turn in the early 1970s when she and her husband purchased a farm in Warner, New Hampshire, where she has dedicated herself to raising horses, keeping a garden, and attending to daily chores and mindful observation of nature. Like Thoreau, Frost, Donarld Hall, or Wendell Berry, the farm is not a retreat but an exploration, a going in

deep in a place in time in order to clarify some of life's essential meanings. It also provides a perspective from which to observe history, from the Holocaust to the war in Iraq. Kumin survived a nearly fatal horse carriage accident in 1999, and she produced a remarkable memoir of the event and her recuperation from it, Inside the Halo: The Anatomy of a Recovery (2000).

In Deep: Country Essays (1987) is a wonderful book of essays, and three poems, that provides an introduction to Kumin's art and life as they weave together at her Warner farm. What other poet can provide a guide to the delights of mushroom hunting and cooking, to mule breeding, foaling, fence building, the country kitchen, and the round of seasons on a hill farm? And what other writer can so adeptly connect readers to that life of the imagination in nature which has played such a central role in American literature from the eras of Thoreau and Frost to today? These essays have an occasional feel to them, as Kumin's life unfolds from season to season, but there is a design to the volume in its arguments for the necessity of people to connect to nature, and especially to animals, to live a whole and moral life in the later twentieth century. The opening chapter "In Deep" introduces readers to the extraordinary powers of observations of nature in her writing, an indication of her commitment to Thoreau's transcendental dicta to find spirit in the particulars of New England local ecologies and her recognition. She also invokes Rilke's advice that in the absence of religious faith or transcendental nature spiritualism, poets must be the vehicles whereby the creation names itself. Evoking Frost's "The Road Not Taken," Kumin suggests a different course than Frost's into the landscape and into human consciousness:

One day, riding in deep, the perfect trail will materialize, a leafy carpet underfoot, and overhead just room enough—a tunnel for my chestnut horse and me. We will trot for miles this way, admiring the crackle we make in late November, admiring the configurations of hummocks and rivulets underfoot with glistens of ice between, and bits of bright blue sky visible over the next rise. Eventually we will come out on the other side.

What is waiting on the other side? Maybe nothing special, maybe only more of the same, dear enough for this watcher. But the quest is real. To get there you have to go in deep. (2)

Kumin writes with great wit about her life on the farm in all its unexpected joys and sorrows. She frequently returns to discussions of the writing life, gently prodding the reader to consider the activities of mushroom hunting, fence building and learning to ride as metaphors for writing poetry, and by implication, methods for finding our deep connections to nature. It is particularly a woman's vision of nature and of writing, as she compares her farm to Virginia Woolf's famous "room of one's own." In contrast to Thoreau or Frost, she repeatedly reminds us of the essential power of nature's fertility that is the primary bond between humans, body and soul, and the natural world. She simply states that Nature will have "the final say," an inescapable, but in her work, a life-affirming fact.

Nature may have the final say, but Kumin's desire to communicate with animals, starting in her childhood innocence, is a challenge to adult's, and indeed modern society's

hubris in neglecting this desire. One is reminded indirectly of Swift's Gulliver's Travels, in which Gulliver finds human society intolerable after a life with horses. Such communication with nature can also be found in the garden and in the democracy of a country kitchen where meals are cooked and produce canned. These traditionally domestic and female concerns take central place in connecting humans to history and to the rhythms of nature. Kumin's essay "The Unhandselled Globe" is a tribute to Thoreau's commitment to the literal, both in his experience of nature and in the development of a language to describe and explore it. "Thoreau makes us see ourselves as part of the picture" (156) in nature, something people need to recover to save nature and themselves. The concluding essay, "A Sense of Place," is one of the very best statements in American literature on this important theme. It is beautifully written, with breathtaking descriptions of a New Hampshire winter and its quiet meditations on her private daily experiences. The poem "Feeding Time" traces these activities, in all the literal and metaphoric meanings of giving and getting nurture, and it concludes with an astonishing connection of the daily to the cosmic, followed by her statement of belief:

It's ten below.  
The house dozes.  
The attic stringers cough.  
Time that blows on the kettle's rim  
waits to carry us off.

Clearly, the impulse for poems in here for me, in the vivid turn of the seasons, in the dailiness of growing things, in the quite primitive satisfaction of putting up vegetables and fruits, gathering wild nuts and mushrooms, raising meat for the table, collecting sap for sweetening. Without religious faith and without the sense of primal certitude that faith brings, I must take my only comfort from the natural order of things. (162)

Kumin acknowledges that New England can seem like a nostalgia trip and that farms are failing, but she sees in poets and poetry a strategy for survival. She evokes the "adamantine character" of Frost and Thoreau and a "holy sense of the minute observable details of the natural world" as New England legacies, and she acknowledges the other poets who influenced and nurtured her life as a female poet and her verse.

Poet Wes McNair writes that Kumin shows "it is by experiencing our connection with other creatures that we may better know our connection with the natural world in general," and in her later volumes, such as Nurture, this theme is placed "even more fully in the context of social and historical realities," such as "threats to the environment and sociopolitical distraction and distress" (McNair 131). This is not to make Warner a pastoral or edenic retreat, however, for Kumin recognizes the violence and exploitation of the relationship of humans and animals even in her own nurturing life. In Nurture, Kumin reflects upon the harm any member of modern society does to nature, thus bearing witness, like Thoreau, to the effect of life on a hill farm in New Hampshire on the global economy and ecology. Alicia Ostriker calls attention to the paucity of women nature poets, since women's bodies have often been associated by male writers with nature itself, and thus women were often excluded from representing the mind of civilization, or

drawn into a language and philosophy that denigrated a truly close connection with the physical creation. Kumin's work, therefore, is extraordinarily significant not just because it extends the nature of writing of a Thoreau or a Frost, but because it offers a profoundly new and original engagement with nature.

In "Requiem on I-89" Kumin considers the brutal equation of survival of the fittest in the face of man's intervention in nature with highways and internal combustion, ironically serving the crows who benefit from this man-made slaughter. The formal qualities of the poem counterbalance the chaos of traffic and death with the ordered lines and the stanzaic refrain. Surely Kumin's dark humor includes poets with the crows whose songs arise from such events.

### Requiem on I-89

Crow pecks protein from the asphalt smear.  
Woodchuck, muskrat, porcupine. The cousins  
come. They strut, bicker over the impromptu  
feast. Tire marks carry the stain  
over the center line: bone shards, red fur  
shreds of flesh up, up, up the food chain.  
Such sated caws, such croaks of sorrow.

A mile down the median a deer  
that chanced the metal barrier  
--unforeseen by Darwin—between nature  
and the internal combustion engine  
lies on its side, burst open. The second  
cousins arrive from hayfield, hedgerow.  
Such sated caws, such croaks of sorrow.

Crows and cockroaches are survivors in Kumin's poems about death, and perhaps she herself identifies with such survivors in light of the deaths, sometimes by suicide, of other poets in her generation. The survivor acknowledges death but also takes on the mantles of memory and testimony, like a Holocaust survivor. In "Women and Horses" Kumin counters Theodor Adorno's statement, "After Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric," by listing the continuing historical horrors of Vietnam, Korea, Kuwait, Somalia, Haiti, Afganistan, the Towers as the impulse to "celebrate whatever scraps the muse, that naked child, can pluck from the still-smouldering dumps." She lists the commonplace joys of her daily life in the incantatory lines of the Kaddish, the Psalms, and Whitman's poetry to affirm a world where life can be "in the words of Isaac Babel / as a meadow over which women and horses wander."

This poem recalls a persistent feature of Kumin's work--her engagement in contemporary and historical, social, and political subjects. In *In Deep* Kumin writes, "In this increasingly complex era I think the poet's obligation has also been enlarged. Now I must face the issues of survival, of hunger and genocide, or natural (or unnatural) human depravity" (178). At times, she has addressed these issues obliquely through "tribal

poems” about her family and through autobiographical, if not confessional, poems that are a hallmark of her generation of poets who made women’s lives and consciousness a primary subject in American verse. At other times, she takes on current events such as wars, protest, and governmental intrusion into private lives. In Jack the poem “New Hampshire, February 7, 2003,” compares the difficulties attending a snowstorm to the blizzard of bombs that fell on Vietnamese children and may fall again in Iraq: “Snow here is / weighting the pine trees / while we wait for the worst: / for war to begin.” In “Appropriate Tools: An Elegy And Rant,” Kumin reminds readers of the course of history during her lifetime, from two world wars, Great Depression, and Holocaust, but then she joins this history to the immediate danger to citizens and poets: “An elegy for this century born in blood and bombs / and for the simple rights we once took for granted: // the right to speak out, congregate, sit down / go limp, sometimes get beaten up or tear-gassed . . . .” While some critics may consider an engagement in politics somehow unpoetic or lament a mixing of art and politics, it might be more appropriate to consider such poems public speech rather than simply political speech. The public constituted the American republic at its founding, and one became part of the public, and thus a citizen, by exercising the rights of free speech, petition, and voting. Thus speaking in public is always for Americans a profoundly political act, and our poet-citizens know best of all that silence is not only suicide but also the death of patriotism. One of New Hampshire’s gifts to American democracy is its public poets, including Frost, Eberhart, Hall, Simic, and Kumin. Thus Kumin must rant against the obscenity of a Patriot Act that limits free speech. She bitterly predicts that “this poem will be / swept up and discarded,” and protestors will be “Up against the wall in the U.S. of A.”

By emphasizing “U.S.” Kumin implicates all citizens in a politics that creates enemies of patriotic citizens. This challenge to conscience that implicates people in the minds and souls of humans whose acts may be horrific is another hallmark of Kumin’s work, especially evident in Jack in “The Rapist Speaks: A Prison Interview” and “The Agony.” The latter poem starts with the story of New Hampshire’s Manuel Gehring who murdered his children and buried them in an as-yet-undiscovered grave in July, 2003. It then moves to her memories as a young Jewish child in a Catholic school contemplating the crucifixion, in its gruesome reality and its artistic representations. Kumin struggles to acknowledge a shared humanity with Gehring, since all people, given the event of the Crucifixion, are capable of causing agony. Yet she also suggests that humans who contemplate Gehring or Christ’s agony cannot escape the consciousness of human cruelty and evil, so the poem ends with a plea and a prayer, “May it please the court to appreciate that he is mad / and append a crucifix and a rosary to his name.” As in her nature poems and essays, Kumin returns here to the primary responsibility of the poet to name the realities of our world.

Kumin includes in Jack one of her most impressive of many poems in her work that addresses the poet’s art. In “The Zen of Mowing” Kumin engages a long pastoral tradition of poet/mowers, most notably Robert Frost in “Mowing” and “The Tuft of Flowers.” Here it is a mowing machine, not a scythe, and it is a late rowen cutting in September, by a poet very nearly cut down herself in an accident in 1999, of the distinctively New England growth: “The newly sharpened blade takes down milkweed, mullein, // thistle, purple / clover, Indian paintbrush, nettle, ragweed, late-summer

asters //grass, timothy . . .” The lines of the poem mimic the path of the mowing through the meadow, creating order in language as in the unruly growth of nature. As the blade stutters over sumac stubble, we see a lesson for human rejuvenation in the sumac’s roots, “regrouping thread by thread, going on as we do, fiercely but soundlessly.” The lyric stops time, and the poet looks back like Lot’s wife, not to produce salty tears, nor Frost’s “momentary stay against confusion,” but to observe in nature as in poetry, a moment suspended between destruction and regeneration that can only be discovered in retrospect through the creation of a poem. Anyone who looks back over one’s life and time will find wisdom and inspiration in Maxine Kumin’s poetry.

#### Discussion Questions:

1. What are the distinctive features of New England’s landscape, especially in the particularities of farm, forest and field? What do they mean to you, and in what experiences in nature do you take especial pleasure? Why?
2. Kumin writes extensively of the common chores and experiences of women’s lives, especially those involving nurture, such as raising children, cooking, and caring for animals. In what ways does Kumin connect to what you do in your daily life and how you feel about these activities?
3. Many of Kumin’s poems and essays treat the subjects of loss and death. How have you dealt with such events? Does Kumin’s writing connect to your feelings and strategies?
4. Discuss one of Kumin’s topical or political poems. Do you agree or disagree with her?
5. In “The Sunday Phone Call” Kumin imagines a call from her dead father in which their relationships, with its love, silences, and misunderstandings plays out. In other poems, she imagines reconciliation with siblings. Discuss how one’s family relationships continue to play out in our lives. Do you still hear the voices of kin long absent?

#### Suggestions for Further Reading:

Grosholz, Emily, ed. Telling the Barn Swallow: Poets on the Poetry of Maxine Kumin. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1997.

“Kumin, Maxine (Winokur) 1925-.” Contemporary Authors New Revision Series, vol. 69 (Detroit: Gale, 1999): 300-306.

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McNair, Wesley. “Kumin’s Animal Confederates.” Emily Grozholz, ed. Telling the Barn Swallow: Poets on the Poetry of Maxine Kumin. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1997. Pp. 122-34.

Ostriker, Alicia. “Making the Connection: The Nature Poetry of Maxine Kumin.” Emily Grozholz, ed. Telling the Barn Swallow: Poets on the Poetry of Maxine Kumin. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1997. Pp. 74-91.