

MAKING POEMS, MAKING HISTORY: AN INTERVIEW WITH MAXINE KUMIN

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Years ago the poet Michael Harper, my collegiate mentor, insisted that I learn my “geography”—his shorthand for the literary history of my hometown. Although poets can grow up anywhere, and do, I had been lucky to sprout in Boston. As an adolescent, I heard readings by Louise Glück, Rosanna Warren, Robert Pinsky, and Frank Bidart. Once in college, I began reading the poets from Boston’s fabled midcentury: a milieu that included Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop, Stanley Kunitz and Jean Garrigue, Sylvia Plath and Peter Davison, Anne Sexton and Maxine Kumin, among others. Only three from this remarkable coterie were still alive at the turn of the millennium.

With the long-stemmed hubris of an eighteen year old, I set out to meet the trio from this older generation of “Boston” poets, traveling first to New York City on a colicky bus to hear Stanley Kunitz, then 95 years old, read at the 92nd YMCA to a packed adoring crowd. Armed with an old-fashioned letter of introduction, I paid my next visit to Peter Davison a few months later at the old *Atlantic Monthly* office with its ship-deck slanted floors. With a boyish air of secrecy, Davison augmented his account of Boston’s literary scene in *The Fading Smile* (1994) with the rarebit of gossipy conjecture, sharing his romantic regrets from those years, including his botched courtship of Sylvia Plath (a “botching” he attributed to Plath’s disapproving mother) and his great admiration for the “wonderfully sane and generous” Maxine Kumin, a poet whose steady achievements, by Davison’s admission, had outdistanced his own.

Visiting Maxine Kumin, the third and final poet on my “hometown” list, proved harder. For one thing, I felt compelled to read everything she had written, and her output over four decades had been prodigious. For another, her Pulitzer Prize winning volume, *Up Country* (1973), featured a gruff New England hermit, and I had not outgrown my adolescent shyness. Preparing for the interview, I was newly daunted by the spare formalism of Kumin’s best poems and by the secular homilies in her essays. But I also felt drawn to the classical topoi in her depictions of girlhood and the New England landscape. Long before it was in vogue, Kumin was writing a version of eco-poetics, reading humanity against and through its creaturely counterparts with an unsentimental pastoralism close to that of Thomas Hardy or Robert Frost.

There was another reason I felt a keen affinity for Kumin’s work. In 2000, Kumin had published a memoir, *Inside the Halo and Beyond*, which chronicled an equestrian accident that broke eleven ribs and left her with a “hangman’s fracture” in her neck. Though she regained full mobility, Kumin managed chronic pain for the rest of her life. *Inside the Halo* was a primer for recovering from catastrophe, limning parallels between survival, athleticism, and a writer’s disciplined imagination; the chronology of Kumin’s accident coincided, moreover, with a transforming incident of my own. In reading Kumin’s description of a prolonged hospital stay, a “caging” of her head and neck inside of a metal frame, and the difficulty of constructing life anew, I felt an intimate gratitude for the author though we had not met.

Finally, Kumin was a poet unafraid to live her politics. As laureate for the United States in the early 1980s and as New Hampshire’s laureate for several years, she did not shy from sharing her views. When we met in 2005, she had recently published a sequence of poems in *American Poetry Review* protesting the torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib. Those poems and her comments about the complexity of waging war with “terror” seem prescient given the current multi-faceted crisis in the Middle East.

On the morning after Christmas in 2005, I drove my small Volkswagen through the snowy hills of New Hampshire. I needed the low gears to make it up the steep incline to the Kumins’ “Po’ Biz Farm” where blanketed horses stood grazing hay on the hilltop; as I reached the hill’s crest, the horses lent me and my puffing car their casual notice. The spry gray-haired poet promptly answered my knock at the door of her two story house. Tall, thin, keenly aware, Kumin ushered me inside a sunlit front room and commented that our interview would not be interrupted: her octogenarian husband was at the local gym. As I expected, we quickly got down to the business of conversation.

HT: Maxine, my first question is about your recent poems in *American Poetry Review*. What is the role of the poet at a time of political crisis?

MK: [...] I’ve changed my opinion. I used to think that politics had no place in poetry, but now I feel very strongly the other way. I feel that the role of the poet is to act as a witness and to speak up and indeed to cry out, if necessary. *APR* printed four of the nine torture poems. The others are going to be in the *Women’s Review*, *The Nation*, and *The Progressive*. As we go along, they suddenly get formal, so the last two are a villanelle and a pantoum. I was driven to write them: I couldn’t write anything else. So, I think the role of the poet is to be a citizen and to take civic action because we live

in a time of crisis unlike any that this nation has ever seen before. I think we are in more danger of becoming a fascist state today, an imperial fascist state, than ever—I mean it makes the Nixon era look like mere bagatelle.

HT: Our political theater is worse than McCarthyism?

MK: Yes, absolutely. I was, believe it or not, ironing my husband's shirts during the McCarthy Era. (I gave up ironing a long time ago; I would rather eat nails at this point.) But I remember listening to the McCarthy hearings while ironing shirts, and I remember when Joseph Welch exclaimed, 'Have you no shame?' A classic line.

HT: One poem in *APR*, 'Don't Call It,' seems to summon the reader directly. The last two stanzas read, 'Now see a concrete floor, a medieval /shackle bolted to the middle /where naked prisoners lying in their own / urine and feces are left chained / for 24 hours in fetal position. /One, now comatose, / had pulled his hair out in the night. / Is there no end to these? / Blinding lights, snarling dogs, the American / way. Don't call it what it is.' To whom is this poem addressed?

MK: It's a cry from the heart. I'm sure everyone saw these images on TV; it's hard for me to believe that Americans are doing this. I've been naive enough to believe that the United States doesn't torture, when clearly we do: We just don't call it torture.

HT: W. H. Auden claimed that poetry makes nothing happen; in a recent interview, Charles Wright ventured that poetry can make things happen albeit on an individual level between the poet and reader.

MK: I think Charles is right. We poets are a tiny minority. We are often viewed in the culture as effete and absentminded and intellectual and withdrawn, and therefore how could we possibly be a voice for change? But I think whether poetry can make things happen is not a question that's relevant since no one who writes poetry is writing it for reasons other than the individual's obsession with words [...]. And if, in the course of finding words to embody one's felt thoughts, one can also affect change, that's wonderful. I remember when Carolyn Forché's book came out.

HT: *The Angel of History?*

MK: No, before that. *The Country between Us*. There was her beautiful face and figure on the front cover. She was attacked terribly by a lot of male poets, saying how it was egotistical of her to have her face on the cover—while everybody who has written a book knows that you have no say in your cover: the publisher decides. And Forché's critics also said 'Oh, she was only in Latin America for six weeks,' which is also not true—she was there for a couple of years. That one prose poem, 'The Colonel,' about the despot spilling the human ears on the table and the ears speaking [...] has improved the climate for writing political poems. A whole generation of students has been exposed to that poem. So, in that way, poetry has made something happen.

HT: Returning to your poems about the Iraqi prisoners, Maxine: some philosophers argue that physical pain is beyond the reach of language. Yet with these poems, it seems impossible for the reader not to register them viscerally. Can poems evoke something we might call 'somatic sympathy' in the reader?

MK: I think that's the hope; that's the expectation. 'Somatic sympathy' is a wonderful way of putting it. The visual images [of torture] are so painfully evocative, but we must make the effort to translate them into words.

HT: I recently reread *Inside the Halo*, your memoir that chronicles your recovery from a life-threatening 'hangman's fracture,' which you sustained in an equestrian accident while training for a competition. Maxine, I wondered if this experience—the injury, its dire risk to your life, your slow recovery—might not lend you some uncanny insight into the plight of political prisoners.

MK: Well, I think I would have had exactly the same reaction to the situation in Iraq without my accident. The accident changed nothing except to make me a prisoner inside my pain, and I had to learn to live with that. But it hasn't made me a better person, a worse person, or a more moral person or anything at all.

HT: Have you had to adapt your writing hours or compositional style?

MK: My right side is mostly affected and I have neuropathy in my feet and in my hand, but I'm able to function. I can type and I can do just about everything that I did before. I will never get rid of the pain that is associated with the fractures in my neck; it's always there, so I've had to learn to

live with it. You either give up or you go on: Those are your two choices, as you've found out yourself.

HT: I couldn't say it better. Maxine, you've cited three necessary ingredients for poems, 'geography, chronology, and furniture,' aspects that add to the symbolic and actual thickness of the lyric. In your latest book, *Jack and Other New Poems*, the 'furniture' includes a Lexus car, a lawn mower, Mary Baker Eddy's telephone, an ominous crucifix, Theodore Roethke, Siamese twins, Ulysses S. Grant, and a black bear. What can you tell us about 'furniture'? Do younger poets value it enough?

MK: It depends on what particular school of poet you're talking about. If you're talking about the Language poets, they're not interested in thingness. Thingness is a part of narrative flow, and they're not interested in narrative flow. In fact, I have to honestly say it escapes me what Language poets are interested in. I find that stuff unreadable, and I'm curmudgeonly enough now at my age that I just don't bother. [...] People who are not poets cannot read it, and many people who are poets also cannot read it. So I think it's just a phase that we're going through. There is already, I feel, a shift back to narrative thread. I'm not asking for point-by-point development [in poetry], but I would like to be able to follow a thread somehow through the body of the poem.

HT: My collegiate mentor, Michael Harper, likes to quip that 'geography is identity.'

MK: Of course it is. We are where we came from. I will always be identified in my mind with the convent of the sisters of St. Joseph where I went to school for my first formative years. It left a mark on me, and it made me aware of my Jewishness. [*Dogs barking. Kumin lets them out. A pause, then she returns.*] I had a letter the other day from a guy who was a student of mine at Center College in Danville, Kentucky in 1972. I was there for 6 weeks, preceded by Howard Nemerov, my pal, who put me up for the job. As I say in the poem, 'Can I be the only Jew in Danville, Kentucky, looking for matzo?' For me Kentucky was a more exotic venue than if I had gone to Kenya or Greece.

HT: No doubt. What does winter here at Po' Biz Farm entail for you and Victor?

MK: Now it entails very little because we have a live-in caretaker. We've had that arrangement for five years, so winters here are very benign. I look out the window and I see that horses are out there, and they've already been fed; they're out on their hay piles. If I don't see them, I know that George has carried hay up to the top of the first field so they can stand in the sun. He takes marvelous care of them. [...] And we keep the back stairs [fireplace or furnace] going. Today's very benign so we won't need it, but as the weather gets colder, we keep the back lighted so that the heat can go up through the grate into my study. Otherwise, my study is gelid and I can't sit down.

On a day like this when the sun is pouring in those front windows, I know I don't need to go south. You know, we tried going to Florida. I taught at the University of Miami and, for three years, at Florida International University. But I just couldn't stand Florida. [*Kumin lowers her voice to a conspiratorial whisper.*] I think I'm allergic to Florida! [...]

HT: In the early days of your career, you were living in the greater Boston area—in my hometown of Newton, in fact—and working with a coterie of poets from John Holmes' workshop, which included Anne Sexton, George Starbuck and Sam Albert. What was it like to work in that heady mix?

MK: It was marvelous; it was wonderful. We didn't realize that we were making history; we were just making poems. Our workshop was very argumentative and very noisy. My kids used to say, 'Oh, the poets are coming? Can we sleep in the room over the garage?' because we tended to get loud. I'm very grateful that I had those years, and I miss George Starbuck terribly. He was very funny, very intelligent, and very aware of the emotional current in the room. Often, he often could sort of calm troubled waters. [...] He was also a presence in our family. He would come out, taking the green line out to Newton Highlands, and stay for supper. Rolfe Humphries had just published his new translation of *Metamorphoses* and George had edited it, so he came with that and read sections to [my son] Danny: bedtime stories from Ovid.

HT: Peter Davison's *Fading Smile* depicts the Greater Boston area as having quite a dynamic milieu of writers in those years.

MK: It was. [...] Anne [Sexton] and I were both desperate to become poets—published poets with some authority—and we both got there, which was a miracle at that time.

HT: Was it difficult to be writing with so few female predecessors?

MK: Yes, it was difficult. And we knew it, and we were desperately trying to break the mold. To get published as a woman was a feat. We were viewed as some species of rare, flightless bird. To get a poem into the *New Yorker*, to get a poem into *Harper's*, or to get published in the *Atlantic [Monthly]* was a huge triumph. Some venues were more hospitable than others. There was a journal back then called *The New Orleans Poetry Review* run by a physician, and I think Anne and I both had early work in that. That was a place to start off. And [there was] *Audience*, a magazine in Cambridge. But it was having mentors like John Holmes; John gave me a big leg up by taking me to a Poetry Society of America banquet in New York after I had won some little prize. He also took me over to *Harper's* and introduced me to the poetry editor there [...] and shortly thereafter I was able to sell a poem to *Harper's*. So it doesn't hurt to have these associations, and I think it taught me how important it is to be a mentor. I have striven in my lifetime to be available to young women and to provide blurbs; nothing irritates me more than these lofty poets who say, 'Well, I don't do blurbs, I can't be expected to *blurb*.' [...] I remember kindnesses that were paid to me, and I want to extend those kindnesses. Also, I see poetry by women developing in such wonderfully rich, exciting ways, and I want to provide whatever praise and help I can.

HT: In your poem 'Male Privilege,' dedicated to the younger poets 'to be cleansed of envy,' you recount the situation of younger women poets being bedded by old bards.

MK: Absolutely: all the young groupies. Go to Bread Loaf.

HT: 'Bed Loaf'?

MK: Yes, it is Bed Loaf! It's what everybody does because how much poetry can you do? You have to do something else after 9 o'clock at night. But this business of giving yourself over to a major male poet or critic in the hope that it's going to advance your career: In some cases, it works that way, but in many others, they just talk about you.

HT: Is literary sexism today different than it was in the '60s and '70s?

MK: Let's just say it's not going to end any time soon. When I look back,

I went through four years at Radcliffe, and I never saw a woman instructor, assistant professor, associate professor, or full professor, not one. Do you know that old saying, 'there was a man so poor he fell in love with jail'? That's the position that we were in. We didn't know any better, and we accepted it as a given. I did get a wonderful education, but I was extremely lucky in my professors as a history and literature major. [...] I had Harry Levin, of all people, and I wrote my honors thesis under Harry's benevolent gaze. It had the most pretentious title, 'Amorality and the Protagonist in the Novels of Stendhal and Dostoevsky.'

HT: Many critics credit your generation with broadening the poetic gestalt by writing directly about women's lived experiences.

MK: I was certainly conscious of it when Jim Dickey attacked Sexton for that poem 'In Celebration of My Uterus,' and he announced to the world how disgraced he was by poems about women's private parts. Of course it was okay for him to write *Deliverance* with a scene of male buggery—that was perfectly alright—but anything about women's bodies was repugnant. That was when I really became aware of what we were up against. I can't say that I ever sat down specifically to write a poem that would broaden any gestalt, et cetera, but this is what is happening, and this is what I find quite exciting. I wrote a poem, it's in *The Law of Marriage*, called 'Giving Birth.' It's about going over to Geneva, Switzerland, to be with my daughter Judith when her son was born. I was her birth partner. But it's also about what I went through in becoming a mother and how different it was. You could almost take that difference in the birthing process as a symbol for what has happened in women's poetry. We have gone from the constriction of being licensed to write little lyrics about God, butterflies, and brownies to this open scene where women can write about giving birth; they can write about nursing babies; they can write about fighting the good fight within the university or the culture at large for equality of recognition. So, yes, to answer your question, I was very aware of what we were up against.

HT: When I interviewed Peter Davison, he stated that from his editorial perspective, as poetry arbiter at the *Atlantic Monthly*, very few poets from your generation have approximated the breadth of your career in letters. Could you comment on what has allowed, inspired, or required you to write?

MK: For one thing, I lucked into a good marriage. Because we were poor

and had three children, we had to share the household chores, so we got in the habit of a 50/50 relationship from the outset. [After getting a masters degree at Radcliffe] I ghosted medical articles for doctors. Then I started writing light verse for 'The Slicks' [...]. And because I had small children, I turned to writing books for children. The first one came out in the same year as my first poetry book, 1961. And then I was launched. To the side of our poems, Anne [Sexton] and I wrote fanciful children's books such as *Joy* and *the Birthday Present* and *The Wizard's Tears* to make money. But we also had a wonderful time writing them. Whoever was at the typewriter had veto rights, and we took turns at the typewriter. Annie had a wonderfully wild imagination, and we meshed beautifully. We had a terribly good time.

I was always a writer [... even if] these were unorthodox beginnings. I don't think many poets start out writing light verse for magazines and children's books, but it helped make me the formalist that I am, though I'm not quite as formal anymore.

HT: In *Jack and Other New Poems*, there are a number of riveting dramatic monologues. What is the attraction of this form for you? What's at stake in enlivening these psychologies for the reader?

MK: I think it's the novelist in me that wants to develop these alternate stories. Alan Michael Parker did a book called *Imaginary Poets*, and he asked me and a bunch of other poets to write in the voice of someone else, and I wrote 'Inge in Rehab,' which is about an anorexic girl. For the poem 'Magda of Hospice House,' I drew from a story my daughter shared from her work with the United Nations Human Rights Council. She's the high commissioner on refugees, and she was at that time in charge of the Belgrade office. A lot of Romanians were getting out by way of the Danube, floating across the river on inner tubes, or wading if they could, and the standard procedure was that once they made it into what was then Yugoslavia, they were jailed for a brief period of time, and then freed. And this particular young woman, Magda, spoke several languages and so she got a job in Judith's office, and I took that as my starting point. [...]

HT: In reading these personae poems, I was thinking about Robert Hayden's notion of the 'psychograph,' and his letter-poem in the voice of Phillis Wheatley, addressing her sister. It's the poet's capacity to—

MK: To 'imagine,' to create something beyond experience. We once had a carpenter named Woodrow Wilson Crabtree who went by Woody Crabtree.

And he put this house's kitchen, an old-fashioned kitchen, together for us. Woody was in the U. S. Cavalry in the 1930s, and he told me this wonderful story. They were in Arkansas, and it was really hot. And the sergeant said, 'Men, I want you all to dismount and crawl across this field. There's an imaginary enemy on the other side of this field.' Woody got down and he started to crawl, but they were in short-sleeved summer issue, and it was all ground blackberry, you know, dewberries we call them, plants that are enormously prickly. And he said, 'The hell with this!' and got up and simply walked across the field. The sergeant yelled at him and said, 'Crabtree! Don't you know there's an imaginary enemy over there?' And Woody yelled back, 'Sergeant, I just imagined a big rock betwixt him and me.' So that's where my sense of 'imagine' comes from, but it fits for what we are talking about.

HT: Many of the poems in this recent collection, while not as formal as your early work, incorporate rhyme schemes and meter. But you're also working with vernacular speech, blending colloquial idiom with form. It results in poems that sound 'talkative,' though they are also deftly crafted.

MK: That was certainly my aim. The harder the subject is to write about, the more likely I am to fit it in a formal bag. For example, there is that final poem 'Sonnet in So Many Words,' which I don't think I could otherwise have written. At other times, writing in form is more or less playful, as in that opening sonnet about the redpolls, 'The Highwaymen.' In general, I like to write tight poems.

HT: One poem concludes, 'Never to say what one feels, and yet, this is a love poem, can you taste it?', a line which suggests a certain reticence.

MK: Writing a love poem is... my God, you have to be... you have to be tangentially off to one side, I think. You can't write a love poem straight out or at least I can't. I feel very strongly that you have to come at it from some unexpected angle; 'We are Lovelier' is one attempt. 'Love's little mellow frogs take the sun.' The unexpected, the details, are what make it go, and it's a poem of desperation. We're making a Marvellian run for it.

HT: Death, in earlier poems and in this book, is unaccompanied by its usual blandishments. But there's also a sense of endearing, enduring tension with the departed. In 'The Sunday Phone Call,' there are lines in the voice

tual ground, I think I would go crazy. [Looking out her window] Yes, I don't think I could live anywhere else.

HT: Your Horatian remove here on Po' Biz Farm reminds me of Elizabeth Bishop's seventeen years in Brazil, her writing studio built alongside a waterfall, and how she characterized those years as her most productive and fulfilling—

MK: Well, she was also in love. That helps.

of a father, addressing his daughter: 'I may be dead, but I'm not clairvoyant—behave yourself.'

MK: [...] That line the muse gave me; I didn't have to fight for that at all. It's funny, but on my desk I have two new poems about my father, as if I can't ever be done with that subject. And maybe you never are. Or maybe I'm just going back through—reviewing my life, I don't know.

HT: In poems such as the 'The Pawnbroker,' you describe a tenacious work ethic.

MK: I think I got that from my father. My father would say on a Sunday evening with a sigh of satisfaction, 'Well I murdered this day.' It's a form of Jewish Calvinism I think. Grace through good works, and good work through application.

Oh Heather, I just realized, you're going to leave with a *dress* of dog hair. I should have given you a different chair.

HT: Not to worry—it's a souvenir. My final question is about what you're reading these days.

MK: I read omnivorously. I just read Anthony Walton's *Mississippi*, which was superb. Then I read *Brothers in Arms*, the book Walton coauthored with Abdul-Jabbar about the all-black tank regiment in World War II. Before that, I'd been reading Edith Wharton because I had actually never read her, and I was rereading a lot of Virginia Woolf: *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*. What else? Of course I read poetry all the time, and I read whatever fiction my daughters hand on to me. I'm a stalwart fan of Alice Munro, Gail Godwin, Margaret Drabble, Jamaica Kincaid, and Jane Smiley. In fiction, it seems I read mostly women, but I'm not against reading men. I'm crazy about Russell Banks, for example.

HT: Would you take one more question? Are there advantages to inhabiting a geographic periphery?

MK: There are definite advantages. I could not survive in New York City and live alongside the poetry mafia. I'm very happy to be on the outskirts, even if it means being on the outs sometimes. I do have moments of sheer jealousy when I see what's going on at Poets' House [in New York City], but I'm not unhappy. If I couldn't open the front door and put my feet on ac-