Address to the Angels Study Guide

Address to the Angels by Maxine Kumin

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Introduction

When "Address to the Angels" first appeared in Maxine Kumin's book *The Retrieval System* (1978), she had been mourning the loss of Anne Sexton, a fellow poet and personal friend, for four years. The title poem in this book refers to her metaphorical notion that one can "retrieve" lost loved ones through the expressions and behavior of their animals□in Kumin's case, her dog has the "brown eyes of [her] father," now dead, her goat "blats in the tiny voice" of an old piano teacher, also dead, and a boy she once loved "keeps coming back" as a yearling colt. "Address to the Angels" continues the sentiment of "The Retrieval System," for it, too, is about personal loss and the role of animals in helping humans come to terms with it. It is also about the role of "angels" who purportedly "circulate among us" to keep humans from being alone when facing tragic events. This is not a religious poem, yet it is not wholly unreligious either. While it may reveal a cynical view on how much comfort angels really offer, it also reflects a persistence to carry on in spite of doubt and insists that each person needs individual resolve to overcome grief. While *The Retrieval System* is a readily available title, "Address to the Angels" also appears in Kumin's volume of selected works, *Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief,* published in 1982.

Author Biography

Maxine Kumin was born Maxine Winokur in Philadelphia on June 6, 1925, and has spent most *Maxine Kumin* of her life in New England. She earned bachelor's and master's degrees from Radcliffe College, during which time she met and married Victor Kumin, a Harvard graduate. The couple settled in suburban Boston, but Kumin did not begin publishing poetry until nearly ten years after that. In 1957, she enrolled in a poetry workshop where she met another suburban Boston housewife□and another soon-tobe major poet□Anne Sexton. Kumin and Sexton began a friendship, which included writing children's books together, that lasted until seventeen years later when Sexton, long troubled by depression and psychosis, committed suicide.

In the late 1950s, Kumin began a teaching career, and, to date, she has been a professor, visiting lecturer, senior fellow, and poet-in-residence at more than fifteen colleges and universities across the country. Once she began writing, she wrote prolifically, her work spanning the genres of novels, short stories, children's literature, essays, and, of course, poetry, of which she has published more than a dozen collections. Since her first published collection in 1961, Kumin's poetic work has been well received, earning her a National Endowment for the Arts grant, a National Council on the Arts and Humanities fellowship, and the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for her 1973 poetry collection *Up Country* .

Spending most of her adult life raising horses, sheep, and dogs in rural New Hampshire, Kumin has gleaned much poetic inspiration from her experiences as a farmer and rancher. Her love for animals, especially horses, figures heavily in her use of metaphors and in the recurring themes in her work. Likewise, Sexton's untimely death has been a source for much of Kumin's work published after 1974. The poem "Address to the Angels," published four years later, draws from Sexton's suicide, as well as other personal losses.

As a young and middle-aged woman, Kumin not only raised horses but rode them as well, developing the skills of a professional and competing in riding events. In her later years, she became a driver, and, ironically, it was her determination to continue equine sports that nearly cost Kumin her life. In 1999, at the age of seventy-four, she was in a driving accident that left her with a broken neck, broken ribs, and severe internal bleeding. Her struggle to survive resulted in a memoir of the ordeal called *Inside the Halo and Beyond: The Anatomy of a Recovery,* published in 2000. In 2001, Kumin chronicled the struggle in poetry with the publication of her latest collection *The Long Marriage* .

Plot Summary

Lines 1-3

The first three lines of "Address to the Angels" set the scene in which the speaker envisions the events of the poem. As with many poems, the real action takes place within the mind of the narrator while he or she is physically somewhere else. Here, the speaker describes being in an airplane, "Taking off at sunset," when the ascension of the plane makes the sun appear to be pulled up with it and "pin[ned] . . . over the rim" of the earth.

Lines 4-6

In these lines, Kumin offers a contradiction to the metaphor proposed in the first three lines. This time, the speaker questions whether the airplane, instead of pulling up the sun, seems more to "push down" the horizon as one may use a nail file to edge down a "loose cuticle."

Lines 7-13

At the beginning of these lines, the speaker reveals her state of mind while she is traveling by plane. She is "up here grieving, tallying / [her] losses," and, although she is not specific at this point, later in the poem she discloses the identities of those "losses." For now, her mind wanders to a creation myth, possibly a take-off on a Native-American legend that contends the world rests on the back of a giant sea turtle, though here Kumin's creature is a "giant fish" that is curled into a ring shape□with its tail in its mouth□making a suitable surface to hold a "flat" earth. In this myth, "sinners" meet their fate on Judgment Day when they all fall "overboard into the black gulf." At first, it seems odd for the speaker's thoughts to take such an abrupt turn from the loss of loved ones to creation lore, but she offers a reason in the next three lines.

Lines 14-16

Here, the speaker still considers the ways of the past, lamenting the times before airplanes and automobiles when humans "walked distances / or went by horse." Perhaps the most critical suggestion she makes here is that "we . . . knew our places / on the planet," implying that in the modern world people are less secure in their relationship with nature, possibly even less sure of the purpose of life.

Lines 17-20

In these lines, Kumin introduces her dubious subjects, "angels," whom she calls "God's secret agents." Whether she intends this as irreverent sarcasm or innocent humor is not clear, but the quirky nod to world-renowned evangelist Billy Graham suggests a wry□though not bitter□wit. What Graham has "assured" the speaker of is that God has sent angels to "circulate among" humans, letting them know that their lives on earth are not all there is, that there are celestial beings watching out for them. If the speaker is indeed "assured," it is not clear at this point in the poem.

Lines 21-26

Throughout the remainder of the second stanza, Kumin paints a less-than-admirable picture of angels going about their daily "twenty-four-hour duty," portraying them more as clumsy, unhelpful onlookers than heaven-sent protectors of humanity. They "flutter" about the speaker and the "house and barn / blundering into the cobwebs" like characters in a slapstick comedy. But Kumin also suggests a less humorous side to angels, as they only look on while "pots boil over" and "the cat torture[s] / a chipmunk."

Lines 27-32

The scenario that rounds out this stanza poses a conundrum of sorts regarding the speaker's *real* opinion on the role of angels in her life□or, at least, on her property. Like the over-boiling pot and the forsaken chipmunk, the pony's situation is a dire, possibly deadly one as he is forced to hang by his caught halter from a tree branch all afternoon. Once again, the angels are seen as useless bystanders unwilling to intervene in the horse's miserable predicament. Then, the speaker calls into question not their *willingness* to be of help but their *ability* to do so. Perhaps their purpose is not to prevent bad things from happening but to be of comfort when they do. Here, the speaker hopes that "six equine angels" were at least present to "fan / the strangling beast" until he was either released or escaped his pain through death.

Lines 33-36

The third stanza of "Address to the Angels" is more contemplative and philosophical than the second. In these opening lines, the speaker asks a rhetorical question about how much anyone can really understand the suffering of another. She uses the point as a springboard to the main contention□that animals are "honest" creatures because they do not have the intellectual capacity "to lie." This, of course, is a backhanded gibe at human beings who do indeed have the capacity, which she considers next.

As the last part of line 36 notes, "Man," when he is about to die, "has a compulsion to come clean." It is a common assumption that even the most "sinful" of human beings, when facing death, will admit their wrongful acts and become repentant in hopes of

gaining God's forgiveness before it is too late. Whether that is true in all cases, it is a familiar enough notion to call death the "sacred criterion," that is, the definer of the right time to tell the truth. Even so, Kumin allows for a distraction in the process of coming clean, and it is yet another human one: "Always it is passion that / confuses the issue." In the speaker's case, the emotion that gets in the way is sadness, recalling the grief over personal losses that she expresses in the first stanza.

Lines 43-48

To further explain her position, the speaker ends the third stanza with a reference to being in the airplane flying over Boston with the sun now set. This time, the speaker provides a clearer view of the cause of her grief, and she admits her own role in it. Not only does the speaker long to have back the loved ones now gone, but she also wants a chance to re-live part of her own life so that she "can do it better."

Lines 49-53

In the fourth stanza, the speaker identifies the people she alludes to in line 8 as "my losses." These first five lines refer presumably to Anne Sexton, Kumin's "best friend" who "did herself in" not long after the two had shared lunch on Sexton's last day. The questions posed to the angels throughout this stanza are both rhetorical and accusatory, as the speaker essentially demands to know where they were□and, ultimately, what they did to help□when all these bad things were taking place. In her friend's case, the speaker wants to know if the angels caught "some nuance" in their conversation that day, some little hint at what the friend was about to do that the speaker herself did not detect.

Lines 54-57

The second person identified is the speaker's father who apparently died of heart failure with the speaker at his side. Here, the speaker accuses the angels of doing nothing to "ease [him] out / of his cardiac arrest" while she sat by the hospital bed "holding his hand."

Lines 58-64

Finally, the speaker identifies the last loss as one of her daughters□not a child who has died, but one who has run "off with her European lover" and is now an "unbelonger" to her mother's world. The speaker's sarcasm is more caustic here, as she wants to know if the angels were merrily fluttering about, or "whirligiging," over the luggage of the runaway lovers and whether these secret agents of God gave their official approval ("imprimatur") of the escape. The speaker stresses the painfulness of losing her daughter this way by comparing it to losing her friend and father through death. But with her child, it is "death-by-separation."

Lines 65-68

In the final stanza of the poem, the speaker stops asking questions and simply addresses the angels regarding her own thoughts on their existence, her own opinion on whether their presence bears any significance. These first four lines imply that they are not significant at all. Even if they do exist, she finds "no consolation" in it because they spend their time "helplessly observing" instead of intervening to make things better. Calling them members of a "sacred CIA" is parallel to her initial descriptor of "God's secret agents."

Lines 69-71

These three lines reiterate the speaker's physical environment while all the thoughts of grief and losses and angels are going through her mind. They also serve to lighten the mood with ironic humor in describing invisible angels as "flattened / against the Fasten Your Seatbelt sign" or "hugging" the toilet bowl in the plane's restroom, obviously not keen on this kind of flying. But, in spite of the brief levity, Kumin ends the poem with a more somber observance.

Lines 72-74

The final three lines reflect the speaker's resolve for the human condition, with or without angels. "[E]ach one of us," she claims, is a "prisoner" of our own lives, "locked up" within the events of "our own story" and, apparently, helpless in preventing the tragedies that occur. While this conclusion may seem to express only pessimism and hopelessness, one who knows much about Kumin and her work understands that there is more than human doom reflected here. This poem is about survival. Even locked inside it, the speaker determines to overcome whatever the outside world throws her way.

Themes

Religious Faith versus Human Will

The most dominant theme in this poem is the human struggle between acceptance and denial of a higher power, between the longing to believe in something and the individual willpower to go it alone. The simple fact of the title implies that the speaker at least allows for the possibility of unworldly beings or else there would be no "angels" to "address." However, the irony and doubt that permeate this poem are unmistakable, and one cannot be sure, even in the end, which side of the struggle the speaker winds up on.

The first indication that the speaker denies the existence of angels is at the end of the first stanza and beginning of the second. The former closes with the description of a creation myth, one involving a giant fish, a flat earth, and a big black gulf for sinners, a fanciful tale whose purpose and value lie far outside the realm of reality. The first line of the second stanza may seem like an abrupt shift in thought, but perhaps Kumin intends it as a direct parallel to the old creation legend she has just described. In other words, she has simply turned from one myth to another, from giant fish to "[n]ow angels," noting only a difference in time, not truthfulness. The mocking tone of the rest of the second stanza supports the notion that angels are only imaginary creatures, and this address to them is little more than an exercise in wry humor. Yet, the tone changes in the second half of the poem when the speaker becomes resigned to the idea that there are no answers to her questions.

If one can take the first sentence of the final stanza at face value, then the phrase "knowing you're around" must disclose the speaker's true belief in the matter. Angels do exist. She knows it. If the issue, or the struggle, is resolved so easily, however, then why all the agonizing over it? Why torture herself with memories of how her friend and her father died, how her daughter disappeared, if she admits believing in "God's secret agents" but takes "no consolation" in it? Perhaps these are just more unanswerable questions, but one thing is clear: it is the struggle itself that makes this such a powerful theme in Kumin's work. Which side the speaker ends up on is not the point. That she is caught up in the flux is.

Animals and Humankind

A secondary theme in this work turns up as a major one in many of Kumin's poems, but, here, the role of animals in human life acts as a backdrop for the larger issue of the human response to religion. Kumin essentially uses the images and situations of the chipmunk, cat, and pony to emphasize the odd, unhelpful behavior of angels who stand by and watch while the animals suffer. These four-legged creatures are important for another reason as well: they "are honest through their inability / to lie." In singling out the animals as honest, Kumin is actually saying that humans, as well as angels, are not.

When a horse or a chipmunk is suffering, one knows it, but, of human beings, she asks, "Who knows how much or how little / anyone suffers?" Only imminent death may make a human "come clean," but animals are innocent throughout their lives, innocent of harboring ill will, innocent of theft and murder, innocent of cheating and lying. Notice, though, that the poem points out animals' inability to lie, suggesting that if they could, they would. More likely, Kumin's implication is directed toward humans: they can and, so, they do.

The poet makes one other subtle comment on the role of animals, found tucked within the creation myth of the first stanza. In pointing out the difference between the old days when people knew their "places / on the planet" and contemporary times when technology has enabled mankind to leave the ground, Kumin notes that people were not alone way back when. Instead, they "walked distances / or went by horse." Including the horse in a lamentation on how much better life was when humans were at peace with nature is not just to show the animal's function as a mode of transportation. Rather, it points to the role of the animal in helping to keep its two-legged master grounded.

Style

The poem is written in contemporary free verse, though it is not without some standard poetic crafting by the poet. Kumin uses alliteration (like-sounding consonants or vowels) and a few subtle slant-rhymes that may go unnoticed on a first-read. Note the repetition of the *s* sound in the first two lines with the words "sunset," "city," "seems," and "sun." In line 3, there are like-sounding vowels in "pin" and "rim," and the consonant *r* in "rim" is paired with "round" in the following line. Samples of alliteration like these are found throughout the poem, such as "barn," "blundering," and "boil" in the second stanza; "compulsion," "come clean," and "criterion," in the third; and "some sacred CIA" in the final.

Because the poem has no specific rhythm, the rhymes that it contains are not as obvious as those in a tightly structured and metered poem. In the first stanza, "round" and "down" are not so subtle, but "distances" and "places" sound good together even though their connection is not as apparent. The same may be said for "beast" and "past" in the second stanza, "out," "wet," and "bed" in the third, and "European lover" and "an unbelonger" in the fourth. The rhymes are not exact, but the words used together provide an appealing rhythm. Probably the most intriguing rhyme comes at the very end of the poem where "lavatory" is paired with "our own story," a small bit of humor, courtesy of style.

Historical Context

The decade of the 1970s was one of personal tragedy for Kumin, and defining her work during this period within its cultural or historical context seems to belie the real anguish of its inspiration. The latter part of the period is not remembered as a time of grieving in American history, nor was the country experiencing the social turmoil and violence that had rocked it during the previous decade. Instead, there was disco music and the smiley face, platform shoes and leisure suits, feminism, shopping malls, and Archie Bunker. There was personal analysis instead of social consciousness, and the Watergate scandal in Washington became must-see TV around the nation. In short, the 1970s is remembered as a time when the counterculture became the no-culture.

In spite of the narcissism and triviality that tended to rule the 1970s, the period was not without its share of social adversity and historical significance. It saw the end of the Vietnam War, though few heralded the occasion with little more than contempt for America's involvement in the first place. Citizens turned away in grief at the loss of human life, and politicians who had supported the conflict turned away in shame at North Vietnam's victory. President Nixon had already lost favor with many Americans for keeping the country in the conflict, so, when his role in the Watergate break-in and subsequent cover-up was made public, much of the nation's citizens wanted to see him gone from the presidency. Nixon resigned from office in 1974.

There were three presidential administrations during the 1970s□Nixon, Ford, and Carter□and all three attempted to bring about serious reforms in domestic and foreign policy, sharing an ideology on several issues despite the difference of political parties. All three were rebuffed by the American public. The idea of abandoning Cold War policy and sharing more geopolitical equality with the Soviet Union did not sit well with many Americans and neither did the prospect of sharing economic equality with Europe and Japan. Regardless of the presidents' proposals for developing a more realistic economy and for re-positioning the United States in a world no longer willing to accept it as the sole leading nation, most citizens saw the new reforms as only fruitless compromises that weakened America's status. The election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980 was a testament to this belief. Reagan demanded a victory in the Cold War and supported maintaining U.S. global leadership. His staunch, hard-line approach appealed to an American public emerging from two decades of a society gone wildly away from old-fashioned values and conservative politics. It seemed that the article for *American Poetry Review* published in 1978, that *The Retrieval System* proves Kumin "has simply gotten better and better at what she has always been good at: a resonant language, an autobiographical immediacy, unsystematized intelligence, and radical compassion."

Criticism

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- Critical Essay #3
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Critical Essay #1

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, Hill considers Kumin's poem for its profound sorrow based on the ultimate aloneness of the individual.

The sentiments expressed in "Address to the Angels" are neither difficult to grasp nor hard to sympathize with regardless of one's religious beliefs. Some critics have speculated on Kumin's reported atheism, but no one seems to have landed on a definitive declaration of such from the poet herself. Others may argue that this poem has little to do with spirituality and that it is more of an attempt to come to grips with personal tragedy outside the realm of faith in a supreme being. What is definite is that Kumin is noted for her themes on survival and human willpower, and one could reasonably argue that those are the central issues in this poem. One could also make a case for the poem's thematic irony and wit, even for the threads of humor that serve to string together the more somber or bitter observances. But do these human feats and emotions convey the full realm of everything the work intends to express? Do they even touch on its most crucial point? No. And the reason lies in its dark conclusion.

The final three lines of this poem extinguish life from the other seventy-one. No matter how clever, how vibrant, or even how cynical the language and messages become throughout the work, its ending is profoundly sorrowful. Here, angels, real or imagined, are useless, as is apparently every other human attempt to connect to something higher, some superior being whose presence may be a comfort to a troubled human. The conclusion is that "each one of us" is "our own / prisoner." Each individual is "locked up in our own story." In other words, there is no hope of finding help outside the individual mind or beyond the capabilities of individual human will, and the key words that define the ultimate state of each human are "prisoner" and "locked up."

This sad resolve comes as some surprise at the end of "Address to the Angels," for it is not hinted at earlier in the poem. One may say that when the speaker talks about being "up here grieving" as she describes the pony's suffering while idle angels look on and counts off her losses in the fourth stanza, she foreshadows a pessimistic end to the poem. Yet each point is offset by a counterpoint, suggesting that the speaker may reach some reconciliation with her elusive subjects, some kind of understanding of what their purpose is and why they do not seem to be of much help when it is needed most. The speaker immediately follows her pronouncement of grief with an allusion to a creation story containing a judgment day, doomed sinners and, presumably, saved believers, and a longing for a better time when humans are more in tune with the world around them. This may not be on par with a happy fairy tale, but neither does it condemn the human being to total isolation. Likewise, in spite of her pony's agony, the speaker still wants to believe that "six equine angels" provide a little comfort for him, even if they cannot relieve him of his pain. The bitterness of the fourth stanza is followed by a statement that at least confirms the speaker's acceptance of the existence of otherworldly beings, even if she finds "no consolation" in it. The phrase "knowing you're around" implies that there is room for a relationship to develop, later if not now.

However, all of these counterpoints are negated by the final three lines, lines that make room only for the ultimate aloneness of the individual.

If any part of the poem reflects even a small glimmer of such a sorrowful outlook, it may be the third stanza, the middle of the work that offers more philosophical musing than concrete description. Just the question that opens it—"Who knows how much or little / anyone suffers?"—suggests a morbid contemplation on the human condition. The fact that this feeling is reserved for humans is made clear in the immediate juxtaposition of how animals handle their own suffering. Animals are "honest" about it, neither concealing nor exaggerating the amount of emotional or physical pain they are

in. "Man," Kumin says, "has a compulsion to come clean," particularly in his final moments of life. Here again, the theme appears to be about making connections, about the human desire and need to find solace in a supreme being, one who may forgive all sins and save the dying person's soul before the body dies. Why should any of these suppositions be included in the speaker's dialogue with angels if the purpose of these beings is categorically removed from the human's? Is her dialogue really only a monologue? If that is the case, and if she is essentially "locked up" in her own "story," then it is a regrettable place to be held "prisoner." Note what her story entails: "Always / I think that no one can be sadder than I am." Granted, this statement smacks of hyperbole, for one can usually find a less fortunate, "sadder" human being than oneself; however, the sentiment is founded on real feelings. If the speaker always feels that she is the saddest person on earth, that thought surely creates aloneness. If the only way to overcome the sadness is to get "part of [her] life back" in order to "do it over," that desire is obviously in vain. While the dismal concentration on personal grief in the third stanza may seem to foretell a dismal ending, it is still surrounded by too many possibilities for hope to be wholly indicative of such a conclusion. There is still one possible option regarding the poem's ending worthy of consideration.

Perhaps the poet did not intend for it to be pessimistic at all. Perhaps its apparent sorrowfulness is really no such thing in the mind of the speaker. As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Kumin is a survivor, both in her personal life and her poetic life. Her dominant themes reflect the power of the human will, and she is living proof that it works. So, when the speaker declares in "Address to the Angels" that having "God's secret agents" around is no consolation, even when they are with humans in their everyday lives around the house or on airplanes or anywhere else, Kumin does not necessarily mean that to be a bad thing. Perhaps being "locked up in our own story" is as it should be, with each individual committed to personal strength and personal resolve with no need of divine intervention. This reasoning would definitely be in keeping with a poet who does not claim any particular religious belief or any tendency toward finding one. The flippant, if not sarcastic, depictions that precede the final three lines of the poem may simply imply a tongue-in-cheek observation of the futility of angels. Highlighting the ineptness of these supposed supernatural creatures could be merely an effective way of pointing out the more realistic powers of the human mind. After all, portraying angels as less-than-noble "sacred CIA. . . . flattened / against the Fasten Your Seatbelt sign" in the airplane does not paint a very respectable picture of them; rather, this depiction is laughable. One may reasonably assume that the poem's

main theme is the survival of human will and the uselessness of a power beyond it. If this is indeed the intention, Kumin's success in expressing it is debatable at best. The fact that the conclusion is difficult to swallow simply cannot be ignored.

"Address to the Angels" is suffused with ironies, but perhaps the most important one lies outside the single poem and within the creation of poetry in general. Kumin's work is a wonderful example of how this genre can both perceive and deceive at once; how it can appear straightforward and still be convoluted; how it can use a short form to cause long arguments usually left unresolved. These points are not meant to confuse the reader but to stimulate healthy intellectual debate and force a pause in first assumptions. While the belief here is that the conclusion of this poem is full of sorrow because it leaves the human being alone in the universe, one may also read it as a positive outcome if one has knowledge of typical Kumin themes. The bottom line is that one should read the poem with an open mind. Whether the ultimate aloneness of the individual is a good thing or a sad thing will always be left up, ironically, to the individual□yet another paradox in a work summarily based on them.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "Address to the Angels," in *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Wakoski gives a useful overview of Kumin's poetic and worldly philosophy, discussing how Kumin's naturalistic poetry helps sustain the poet throughout the evolution of her life.

Maxine Kumin, who jokingly has referred to herself, the earth motherly nature poet, as "Roberta Frost," at first may seem to possess a very simple sense of the physical world. But she is a metaphysician too. Her best collection of poems, *The Retrieval System,* explores ideas that make the notion of death acceptable. Much has been made of her close friendship with Anne Sexton, but its literary importance probably resides in forcing Kumin to leap out of her comfortable physical world of family and benevolent nature into a craggier world and personality, more like that of curmudgeonly Robert Frost.

Earth mythology is always about use and misuse. Thus, the concerns of Kumin as a person become central to the concerns of any twentieth-century of the world: how can we survive the autumn, the "fall," of our misused earth? In "Grappling in the Central Blue" Kumin offers this ongoing theme in her poetry:

Let us eat of the inland oyster.
Let its fragrance intoxicate us
into almost believing
that staying on is possible again this year in
benevolent blue October.

Over the years some of Kumin's best poems have concerned her children and her Demeter-like role, grieving the loss of them as they grow up, but what is most compelling is that she never accepts the impossibility of return, even if it be through magic or metaphysics. Body is as transformable as any other matter. She shows in "Seeing the Bones" her willingness to accept the pain of evolution□

This year again the bruise-colored oak
hangs on eating my heart out
with its slow change

□but she insists on the myth and magic that make return, retrieval, and reincarnation possible. She concludes the poem with the ritual of reconstructing her lost daughter from old artifacts:

I do the same things day by day.
They steady me against the wrong turn,
. . . Working backward I reconstruct
you.

The charm with which Kumin works out her belief in worldly return is captured in many poems, including "The Retrieval System" ("It begins with my dog, now dead, who all his

long life / carried about in his head the brown eyes of my father"). In "On Reading an Old Baedeker in Schloss Leopoldskron," a typical and lovely Kumin poem ("Soft as beetpulp, the cover / of this ancient Baedeker"), she speaks of the ongoingness of the world, with both people and "swans / in their ninetieth generation" returning often. In "Primitivism Exhibit" she returns to the theme of a retrieval system:

Longest I look at the dread
dog fetish, whose spiky back
is built of rusty razorblades
that World War II GI's let drop
on atolls in the South Pacific
they were securing from the Japs
who did not shave, but only plucked
stray hairs from chin and jaw.
I like the way he makes a funky
art out of cosmetic junk
standing the cutting edge of old steel
up straight to say, *World, get off my back* .

Kumin believes in animal species and sees the human animal as having a chance for survival, as in "In the Park":

You have forty-nine days between
death and rebirth if you're a Buddhist.
Even the smallest soul could swim
the English Channel in that time

The best of Kumin's poems, like this one, maintain a cool humor and charm. In addition to her rich and smooth wit, Kumin's greatest skill is to make images, wonderful images, that turn into big metaphors. Playing with dualities and manipulating everyday language so that it works with the complexities of ideas and patterns, she invokes the irony that comes out of Dionysian tragedy. A few lines from "Marianne, My Mother, and Me" define Kumin's poetry and her life: "We / must be as clear as our natural reticence / will allow." The one thing that is clear throughout her substantial body of work is that she believes survival to be possible, if only through the proper use of the imagination to retrieve those things that are loved well enough.

Source: Diane Wakoski, "Kumin, Maxine," in *Contemporary Poets,* 7th ed., edited by Thomas Riggs, St. James Press, 2001, pp. 663-65.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Ludvigson writes about the range of Kumin's poetry.

Life may not be wholly rational, Maxine Kumin says in her poetry, but it is to some degree manageable. In a period when most contemporary poetry reflects a chaotic and meaningless universe, Kumin is one of a handful of poets who insist upon order - upon finding or creating meaning where others deny it exists. Working primarily in traditional poetic forms, Kumin structures her poems as a way of controlling her world. She says in a *Massachusetts Review* interview, "I think that there is an order to be discovered - that's very often true in the natural world - but there is also an order that a human can impose on the chaos of events. That's what writing poetry is all about. You begin with the chaos of impressions and feelings, this aura that overtakes you, that forces you to write. And, in the process of writing, as you marshal your arguments, as you marshal your metaphors really, as you pound and hammer the poem into shape and into form, the order - the marvelous informing order emerges from it."

While Kumin's world is sometimes difficult, occasionally even nightmarish (her third book of poems is titled *The Nightmare Factory,* 1970), it is more often relatively ordinary; it is a world in which problems may be serious but rarely sensational. Though she is often linked with her friend Anne Sexton, Kumin is not, for the most part, a confessional poet. While the "I" of the poems is usually herself and the poems are frequently personal in tone and reference, Kumin consistently reaches beyond the self to an external reality as compelling - both to her and to the reader - as the journey inward.

Kumin has been compared to Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop as well as to Anne Sexton: Lowell for his sense of tradition, both in form and in his emphasis on family, religion, and New England; Bishop for her attention to precise, objective detail; and Sexton for her focus on the personal, the introspective. But it is the tie between Kumin and Sexton that fascinates many readers. Because the two women were close friends who regularly sought each other's advice about poems, critics have looked for and sometimes claimed to find mutual influence. Dabney Stuart says of one of Kumin's recent collections: "It's Anne Sexton . . . who presides over much of this book . . . over the sense of loss as a complex of need and weary sophistication, issuing sometimes in poems that treat the body lightly, as a composite of riddles." Kumin and Sexton have denied such influence, however. In a 1974 interview with *Women's Studies,* each claimed she never tampered with the other's voice, and each offered, according to Sexton, "to think how to shape, how to make better, but not, how to make like me."

Kumin and Sexton do share a concern for the place of women in the world and for the intricate relationships between men and women. A few of Kumin's poems belong vaguely in the confessional category, which she says "is part of a long and honorable tradition in poetry; the voice of the *I* . I think we have that in every age to some degree or other." Like Sexton, Kumin began writing poetry as a kind of therapy, though she speaks of being "wretchedly discontented . . . and guilty about being discontented"

rather than seriously distraught emotionally, as Sexton was. One of Sexton's greatest contributions, says Kumin, was that "she made it possible for women to write about the quality of womanhood in a way that just could not have been taken seriously twenty years ago." But despite a few common themes, Kumin's range is considerably broader than her friend's; and though Sexton wrote a good deal of formal verse, Kumin is more thoroughly committed to traditional poetic forms.

Kumin believes the formal quality of much of her work is directly related to her degree of intimacy with the material. The more personal the subject matter, the more likely she is to depend on conventional devices. She explains, The tougher the form the easier it is for me to handle the poem, because the form gives permission to be very gut-honest about feelings. The curious thing for me is that rhyme makes me a better poet. Invariably I feel it does. This is a mystic notion, and I'm not by any stretch a mystic, but it's almost as though I'm not capable of the level of language and metaphor that form enables me to achieve. It raises my language to heights that I wouldn't be up to on my own. When I'm writing free verse, I feel as though I am in Indiana, where it's absolutely flat and you can see the horizon 360 degrees around. You feel as though you have no eyelids, you can't blink. I lose, I have no sense of, the line. There are people who work easily in this medium; they follow the breath rhythm and the normal pattern of speech. They feel totally at home and I feel totally bewildered. I have to be pretty comfortable about what I'm writing to write a free verse poem; or else not terribly deeply involved. I almost always put some sort of formal stricture on a deeply-felt poem, maybe not rhyme, but at least a stanzaic pattern.

In *Halfway* (1961), her first collection, Kumin shows an early mastery of technique. Though her approach is cautious (some critics judge it boring), she deals skillfully with subjects that she continues to explore throughout her career: religious and cultural identity, the fragility of human life, loss and the ever-present threat of loss, the relation of man to nature. While the book received generally less enthusiastic reviews than most of her later work, there is considerable power in its more personal poems. In "One Dead Friend," for example, grief over the loss of her friend K. C. Wang is as eloquent and poignant as in the later more nearly confessional poems about her father's death. One of those "deeply felt" poems whose emotional content is kept in bounds by formal constraints, "One Dead Friend" employs rhyme and half-rhyme and a loose accentual rhythm. Here Kumin creates a poetic tension the reader recognizes as valid - a tension that reflects the conflict between the expression of sorrow and the need to come to terms with it, to "contain" it.

Formerly a competitive swimmer, Kumin includes in this volume a number of poems about swimming, ranging from the playfully patterned "400-Meter Free Style," which in its typographical arrangement resembles a swimmer's laps down the length of the pool and back, to "Poem for My Son," which uses swimming imagery to develop the theme of the child's once-precarious hold on life and his mother's inability to teach him more than the rudiments of survival. Recognizing that power over the lives of others - even one's own children - is limited, that survival requires responsibility for the self, Kumin believes in letting go.

Such relinquishing is necessarily difficult, requiring a conscious act of will on the part of the strong, whose natural impulse is always to protect others. Her own ease with water makes Kumin's use of pool and sea symbols authentic and believable.

In her excellent sestina "High Dive: A Variant," the diver's dread of every fall, however well prepared for or desired, is fully convincing. Kumin poses, through the metaphor of the diver, the poet's consistent challenge: to perfect technical skills through diligent study and practice, and then to take chances - to attempt more than one can be sure of accomplishing, no matter how high the price of failure. Like the ripples circling the diver, the implications of the poem radiate outward - beyond diving, beyond poetry. Kumin suggests that any worthwhile accomplishment requires this extension past the knowable limits of experience. Such conscious risk taking, however exciting, is always fearsome.

A major theme in her second book of poems, *The Privilege* (1965), is Kumin's childhood ambivalence toward religion. Her Jewish background is revealed as a source of minor conflict with her Catholic neighbors and of a more serious internal disquiet. In "Mother Rosarine" Kumin describes herself as a child who visited the convent next door "and swung on the door to His Kingdom / through which I did not dare pass," saying she was "Wrong, born wrong for the convent games." Finally, in the convent schoolroom, where she "sat alone with the varnished smell / of the scribbled desks, and dreamed of angels," she found a rosary, stole it and slipped away, urgently longing for and, at the same time, resenting the world of the nuns. In another poem a legless man, grateful for the child-persona's willingness to push his cart up the hill, pronounces her "a perfect Christian child." Wanting to impress God and the sisters of "St. Joe," the child has made a show of her good deed, but she is troubled by this inaccurate blessing. The poem ends with the guilty lines: "One day I said I was a Jew. / I wished I had. I wanted to. / The basket man is gone; the stone / I push uphill is all my own."

As an adult, Kumin has renounced formal religion. "Words are the only 'holy' for me. Any God that exists for me is in the typewriters keys." But in the poems of *The Privilege,* religious identity is a crucial issue.

Parent-child relationships are also at the heart of *The Privilege* ; especially moving are evocations of the poet's father, whose death she writes of in "The Pawnbroker." Asked whether she tends to use an understated diction, a less "poetic" diction when she is dealing with intimate material, Kumin responds that she does. She says of that poem, "it did begin flatly. And it simply tells the details. It relies on a thickness of listing things to carry the notion. I wrote that elegy, 'Pawnbroker,' believe it or not, in syllabics as well as rhyme. That's how terrified I was of writing it."

The series of love poems that comprises the final section of the book is particularly impressive. One of these, "January 25th," celebrates the eventual return of spring and the ability of love tentatively to reassert itself. The final stanza is full of sparkling images:

Now daylight the color of buttermilk
tunnels through the coated glass.
Lie still; lie close.

Watch the sun pick
splinters from the window flowers.
Now under the ice, under twelve knee-deep layers
of mud in last summer's pond
the packed hearts of peepers are beating
barely, barely repeating
themselves enough to hang on.

In this poem Kumin's formal requirements are minimal. Only one true rhyme occurs in the stanza: *beating, repeating* . But the assonance, *on, pond; still, milk; deep, peepers* (which echoes *beat, repeat*), creates an irregular continuity of sound that assures the reader that things really do repeat: expectations will be fulfilled, spring will come, and love will revive.

Renewal and love continue as themes in Kumin's third collection, *The Nightmare Factory* . The book seems on the whole lighter than the title suggests, though the dark poems of the final section tend to distort that impression. Kumin says of the title poem, "I wrote it as a way of exorcizing a series of bad dreams about my recently dead father. I then had this fantasy that there is some distant Detroit-of-the-soul where all bad dreams are created, and out of the warehouse of goods, we are assigned certain recurrent nightmares." The poem, which is the final one in the book, begins with the line "These are the dream machines," and it goes on to chronicle nightmares of azis and cossacks, Klansmen and judases, and "postmen with babies stuffed in their mailsacks." Michael True suggests Kumin is being pretentious here; that because she comes from an upper-middle-class, comfortably safe world, she has little experience with "sensational" topics. He also accuses her of indulging in self-pity as "a full-time occupation." Such negative criticism is rare. More typical is R. D. Spector's judgment that these are "wise poems, knowing in the ways of the world and the needs of the people." The first section of *The Nightmare Factory* contains gentle and witty "Pasture Poems" about horses and cows and various aspects of country life. The second section, "Going From Here to There," includes poems set in Amsterdam and Paris, in Boston and Washington, D.C. Some of the best pieces in the volume are found in section 3, "Tribal Poems," which focuses on members of her family - children, parents, and great-grandfather. She speaks with awe of these people whose lives are central to her own, describing her daughter Jane in "The Fairest One of All" as one for whom there ought to be "slithers of satin / and diamonds buckled to your ears / And gold ropes cunningly knotted / under your breasts." The poems celebrate the family, the tribe, whose Jewish heritage she is now comfortable in acknowledging: "Welcome ancestor, Rosenburg, The Tailor! / I choose to be a lifetime in your debt."

Section 4, "For Such a Man and Woman," is a series of love poems, some joyous with fulfillment, some lamenting the fruitlessness of adultery. A typical poem in the latter category, "At the End of the Affair," suggests that when a love affair must end, it should end destructively: "better to break glass, sop with towels, tear / snapshots up / pour whiskey down the drain . . ." Otherwise, the possibility of lapsing back is too great, and the conclusion will be the predictable "tangle in the same old snare / saying the little lies again." Though adultery poems are fashionable among contemporary poets, often

serving as vehicles for a more encompassing guilt, Kumin's seem almost detached, as if she does not quite connect with the experience. In one poem, she claims the adultery she is describing is pure fantasy. Since evasion is not typical of Kumin, it is difficult to know whether she is merely reflecting current attitudes or expressing values she believes in. In either case, these poems are less convincing, less satisfying, than her more affirmative love poems. Finally, in section 5, "The Old Bad Times," there are tough, sharp-edged poems of illness and pain and death.

Up Country, Kumin's fourth collection, won her the Pulitzer Prize. Centered in rural New England countryside, these poems respectfully call up images of Frost and Thoreau, whose spirits dominate the landscape. Using the mask of "the hermit," Kumin presents a life in which "Nothing is sure / under this rooftree keel veed in / with rafter ribs."

Despite the unknowns, these poems end with the objective matter-of-factness of acceptance: "The hermit whistles as he picks. / Later he will put on his shirt / and walk to town for some cream." Or: "He calls the old dog from the front stoop / and goes on walking his fences." While Kumin's view does not suggest a merging of the self with nature, it does insist on man's affinity with the natural world. However uncomfortable he may sometimes be in this world, there is no better choice than to make his peace with it.

Her unsentimental relationship with nature also allows Kumin to write poems like "Woodchucks" and "The Presence," which are ostensibly "about" the necessary killing of woodchucks and mysterious tracks in the snow, but which chill us with her portrayal of man's capacity for brutality. Reversing the man/nature role she sets up in the hermit poems, she shows man now asserting his sometimes irresponsible dominance over the natural world. In a straightforward poem on this subject, "The Vealers," she presents a picture of newborn calves separated from their mothers after their first feeding and left to "bawl and doze sucking air" until, at ten weeks, they will be slaughtered so that humans may indulge their desire for "perfect flesh unstreaked with blood / or muscle." The poems of *Up Country* do not compromise.

Never trivializing the experiences of rural New England life, Kumin celebrates their early importance. An old neighbor getting his first telephone, the first rain of spring, singing hymns to keep her swimming rhythm, picking dewberries - many of these lack thematic weight, but it is a testament to Kumin's talent that she continually brings freshness and surprise to common subjects.

Again, in *House, Bridge, Fountain, Gate* (1975), Kumin draws us to the wonders of the ordinary. Asked whether Louis Simpson's description of an earlier book as "the attitudes and tone of prose in the form of verse" is an accurate assessment of her work, Kumin says she was not sure whether the statement is generally true. Yet in discussing *House, Bridge, Fountain, Gate,* she admits, "if the naming and the particularizing of things is a function of prose more than it is of poetry, to that extent I do [agree with Simpson]. I think that the one thing that's been consistently true about my poetry is this determination to get at that authenticity of detail. At the beginning of the book Kumin quotes Rilke, and then Louis Simpson quoting Rilke: "it is as though things are trying to express themselves through us. It may be, as a poet has said, we are here only to say

house, bridge, fountain, gate." The quotation is essential to an understanding of her poems, for here Kumin presents her usual subjects without embellishment or interpretation. She catalogues cousins, childhood experiences, the lives of ancestors, encounters with fundamentalist Baptists in Kentucky, and her sense of kinship with both wild and domestic animals. In some, she presents collages of varied time sequences, in which the resulting pictures are frightening in their implications. "I can see that smart alec, Teddy / playing games behind the furnace / with Clara. They touch in the coal bin. / He gets ten smacks with the hairbrush / and his plane goes down in the Aleutians. / Arthur's still sucking his thumb / the same arm he loses in Italy."

The psychic space between childhood and death, childhood and failure, is but a moment. Most of her cousins' lives come to one or another kind of grief, and the speaker is left wondering what meaning to assign this apparently determined process. The relentless meter, with its three hard accents per line, reinforces the inevitability of the outcome, which extends beyond the tribe and suggests, more pessimistically than usual in Kumin, the fate of the entire family of man.

Most reviewers applaud the book for its precision, its attention to detail, and its clear vision of life. Though Kumin relies a bit heavily on similes in these poems, her comparisons are remarkably evocative and startling: "her breasts fall down like pufferfish"; "the two foals sleep back to back / in the sun like one butterfly"; "Grandmother's corset / spread out like a filleted fish." Such inventive and accurate images elicit the reader's admiration, no matter how densely they cluster.

Whether she writes of the riddles of the body, the cruelty of scientific experiments with animals, the unreliability of anybody's god, or her kinship with her favorite horse, the voice of *House, Bridge, Fountain, Gate* remains honest, modest, and convincing. *The Retrieval System,* published in 1978, is Kumin's most recent book of poems. Now in her fifties, the "afternoon" of her life, she says, her poems reflect both the wisdom and the weariness of middle age. There is a certain resignation toward disappointment, especially in relation to her children, that was absent earlier. Poems about death - her dog's, her father's, Anne Sexton's, and of course her own - are prominent. Yet even in these poems, Kumin's balanced view is apparent: "When I'm scooped out of here / all things animal and unsurprised will carry on."

One of the most memorable poems in this collection occurs in the section devoted to her old neighbor. In "Henry Manley, Living Alone, Keeps Time," she presents Henry as a victim of "sundowning . . . the way he loses words when the light fades." Either as the result of a stroke or through the gradual disintegration of old age, Henry is frequently unable to remember nouns. The act of naming once again assumes crucial importance. In Henry's troubled attempt to think of the words *"window, wristwatch, cup, knife"* is the echo of Kumin's previous volume, *House, Bridge, Fountain, Gate* . Only by naming can man begin to know the nature of anything, to have any grasp of the real. The reader's heart goes out to Henry when, after such loss, "Terror sweeps him from room to room." At the end of the poem, when Henry retrieves the words for a while, "saying them over, able / to with only the slightest catch. / *Coffee. Coffee cup. Watch,*" the reader shares his relief and gratitude.

The emphasis on naming, on words, on language generally is one of Kumin's essential preoccupations, first to last. In a period when most poets are "playing tennis without a net," as Robert Frost once said of the practice of free verse, Kumin's intelligent, imaginative approach to form is richly satisfying. Her forages into the troubled world of dreams, her complex and ambivalent attitudes toward nature and family, her unflinching confrontation with death - all these reveal Maxine Kumin as a writer whose human concerns and serious search for whatever we can discover of truth are the core of her poetry. Yet it is equally true that much of her work can be characterized as Victor Howe aptly describes *House, Bridge, Fountain, Gate* : "Its goodness is the goodness of home-made bread, handknit socks, or a row of translucent jellies, distilled by an expert and put on the window sill for the sun to shine through."

Source: Susan Ludvigson, "Maxine Kumin," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Vol. 5, *American Poets Since World War II, Part I: A-K,* Gale Research, 1980, pp. 416-22.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Estess explores Kumin's The Retrieval System, *regarding Kumin's reaction to close friend Anne Sexton's death and how that event stirred the feelings of loneliness and anger in "Address to the Angels."*

The Retrieval System, Maxine Kumin's sixth book of poetry, is about surviving loss. It confirms things many of us already knew about its author, a just-past-middle-age, increasingly refined, non- suicidal poet. The main value in both her life and her poetry is preservation. That which is retrieved in her system may be the simple life of fruits and vegetables or it may be something in her unconscious. But in *The Retrieval System* the things that most need to be recovered, savored and saved are the memories of those no longer within the poet's physical reach. This is the primary kind of loss with which Kumin, in her mid-fifties, lives. Kumin's courage in dealing with loss is evident in the poems written about her friend Ann Sexton who died in 1974. After a lunch of tuna sandwiches and vodka at Kumin's Boston house, Sexton drove to her own garage and asphyxiated herself.

From all accounts, especially Kumin's which she will be, as she says, "gathering up for years"the friendship of these two women was extraordinary. Both came to writing late: Kumin at nearly thirty, pregnant with her third child, and Sexton around the same age, after her first mental breakdown. By the end of their time together they had shared much: the collaborative writing of several children's books; the pain of Sexton's ceaseless psychological strife; and their (remarkably different) poetry. In Boston, each had had a separate telephone installed for their daily, often daylong talks. Kumin remarked in a conversation with me, and later informed an interviewer, that these calls often lasted all day, beginning in the morning and continuing through temporary interruptions during which they kept each other "on the line" while each went about her routine. If either wished to resume the conversation she would whistle loudly into the receiver.

In "Address to the Angels" Kumin writes of her deep loss at Sexton's death: "Always / I think that no one / can be sadder than I am." Although such pain is absolute, Kumin's statement here is obviously exaggerated. Yet, as if to prepare for that blatant sentimentality, the poet precedes these lines with the admission that "Always it is passion that / confuses the issue." In any case, by staying with this poem, a reader locates its more crucial substance: the loneliness and anger which result from surviving middle-age and feeling left alone. The poet protests the absence of "angels, God's secret agents" who she is "assured by Billy Graham, / circulate among us to tell / the living they are not alone." Such beings might have protected her against, or at least helped her bear, so terrible a burden, but did not. Job-like, Kumin asks, "Angels, where were you when / my best friend did herself in?"

"Progress Report," another poem which deals with Kumin's grief over Sexton's death, begins with this long, sorrowful sentence:

The middle age you wouldn't wait
for now falls on me, white
as a caterpillar tent, white
as the sleetfall from apple trees
gone wild, petals that stick
in my hair like confetti
as I cut my way through clouds
of gnats and blackflies in the woods.

Kumin suggests to Sexton, now on "the other side," that "the idea of going on without you" seems so difficult that she might not be able to "carry on":

Dear friend, last night I dreamed
you held a sensitive position,
you were Life's Counselor
coming to the phone in Vaud or Bern,
some terse one-syllable place,
to tell me how to carry on.

But without Sexton's advice, Kumin does go on, seemingly because she determines, over and over, to survive:

and I woke into the summer solstice
swearing I will break
your absence into crumbs
like the stump of a punky tree
working its way down
in the world's evening
down to the forest floor.

Kumin herself has stated that she wondered whether she would be able to write at all after Sexton died. But indeed she has, even after such loss, written some of her most plaintive poems. Philip Booth has rightly noted how "gently the ironies reverberate within" the "seeming facticity" of many lines from this book. We witness this phenomenon where subtle enjambment creates almost shocking irony, such as in "white / as a caterpillar tent, white / as the sleetfall from apple trees / gone wild . . . " or in "swearing I will break / your absence into crumbs." In such ways this poet cuts her linguistic path through grief, "through clouds / of gnats and backflies in the woods."

In the fourth section, "Body and Soul," Kumin places two other poems about Sexton. In "How It Is," a month after Sexton's death Kumin is wearing a blue jacket her dead friend left, becoming, in the first strophe, her suicide friend. Hauntingly, the poem begins, "Shall I say how it is in your clothes?" Then snapshot-like lines tell the reader part of how it is:

The dog at the center of my life recognizes
you've come to visit, he's ecstatic.

In the left pocket, a hole.
In the right, a parking ticket
delivered up last August on Bay State Road.
In my heart, a scatter like milkweed,
a flinging from the pods of the soul.
My skin presses your old outline.
It is hot and dry inside.

The poem concludes by suggesting just how intense the heat, how dry the terrain is in that lonely interior within which Kumin endures without and with Sexton:

I will be years gathering up our words,
fishing out letters, snapshots, stains,
leaning my ribs against this durable cloth
to put on the dumb blue blazer of your death.
"Gathering up," "fishing out," "leaning" are all
downward motions which any solitary survivor recognizes
as the person attempts to rebuild out of loss.
More than this, what any poet works both with and against in order to attempt such a process is "dumbness." Kumin's metaphors transform pain into language, the essential groundwork for her ability to speak of and from Sexton's death.

Perhaps the saddest poem that Kumin writes about her recurring memories of Sexton is the complicated and chilling "Splitting Wood at Six Above." As if she wishes unconsciously to postpone stating the grim finality of Sexton's death, it is not until the third line in the second strophe of the poem that the poet tells the reader what the real subject matter is: "You are four months dead." Until then, only the action of the title is described:

I open a tree.
In the stupefying cold
□ice on bare flesh a scald□
I seat the metal wedge
with a few left-handed swipes,
then with a change of grips
lean into the eight-pound sledge.
It's muslin overhead.
Snow falls as heavy as salt.

Finally, in the thirty-third line of the poem, Sexton is addressed:

See you tomorrow, you said.
You lied.
We're far from finished! I'm still
talking to you (last night's dream);
we'll split the phone bill.

It's expensive calling
from the other side.

"Splitting Wood at Six Above" alludes, of course, to former telephone conversations, to how dreams help or don't help Kumin work through memories, to her New England life which requires her to split wood to stay warm, and to a connection between the pain of "splitting wood" in six-degree weather and splitting a nightmare "phone bill," which costs her much. The underlying thematic question of the poem, however, is what happens to the "soul" of something after death. For Kumin, people, like wood, are another kind of matter. ("Time will do this as fair / to hickory, birch, black oak . . .) Yet, "Even waking it seems / logical□" she writes, to assume that Sexton's "small round / stubbornly airborne soul" ascended, and "none the worse for its trip," arrived at "the other side."

Having likened the sound of the departing souls of the dead wood she splits to a single "flap" which rises, the poet mysteriously and appropriately ends the poem with a subtle metaphor for what haunts her most about Sexton's death: "the sound of your going." "Splitting Wood. . . . " ends with five short, staccato lines:

It is the sound
of your going I drive
into heartwood. I stack
my quartered cuts bark down,
open yellow-face up.

The chopping rhythm of this poem suggests the hard, flint-like reality of being split apart. The poem's very creation is analogous to chopping wood, for the will to go ahead into what is cold and inhospitable is characteristic of the will to endure a New England winter, the will to survive the death of a friend, the will to metamorphose suffering into art. The language of "Splitting Wood" is cold, brittle.

Only ten lines out of fifty-three do not end with a monosyllabic, accented word. A few of those words ("eyelash," "ghost-puffs," "tightrope") comprise a spondaic foot. Others either end strongly ("puppet-squeak," "combine") or show the lightest sort of falling off ("nougat," "stammer," "hammer," "calling"). Both rhythm and language retrieve the experience of losing human contact, of being alone within the icy natural world.

"Remembering Pearl Harbor at the Tutankhamen Exhibit," also from the "Body and Soul" section, contrasts modern and ancient attitudes toward death. The poet wonders how many people in line with her to see the exhibit remember what became our planet's most horrible descent into irretrievability, Pearl Harbor and the start of World War II. The poem proceeds to a denial that anything survives the thoroughness of modern destruction:

. . . the king is conveyed
with a case for his heart
and another magnificent
hinged apparatus, far too small,

for his intestines, all in place,
all considered retrievable
whereas if one is to be blown
apart over land or water
back into the Nothingness
that precedes light, it is better
to go with the simplest detail:
a cross, a dogtag,
a clamshell.

A major question that Kumin and *The Retrieval System* pose seems to be "Is lost life, for contemporary people, retrievable?" Her answer is a qualified "Yes": by imagination, and by metaphor, since metaphor allows imagination to emerge.

The poet of the last lines of "Remembering Pearl Harbor" does not adhere to the belief in the resurrection of the body. But perhaps no American poet since Anne Bradstreet or Emily Dickinson Kumin's New England ancestors has been so concerned with showing that soul, or Spirit, both exists and survives the body's destruction. Stating in "Body and Soul: A Meditation" that she "ought to have paid closer / attention when Miss Bloomsberg / shepherded the entire fifth grade / into the Walk-Through Woman," the poet remembers something curious about the experience: "there was nothing about the soul." Kumin never locates the exact bodily home of psyche, yet she seems to think that souls are real:

Still unlocated, drifting,
my airmail half-ounce soul
shows up from time to time
like those old-fashioned
doctors who used to cheer
their patients in girls' boarding schools
with midnight bedside visits.

What *The Retrieval System,* like Kumin's other books of poems, impresses us with is that only our unconscious and imaginative lives enable our bodies to house souls. On the other hand, Kumin, unlike Bradstreet or Dickinson, cannot imagine soul or Spirit apart from body or matter. In "The Excrement Poem," Kumin writes, "I honor s for saying: We go on." For her, the body gives evidence that Spirit is. It is the body, therefore, that she fears to lose.

In Kumin's best poems, descriptions even descriptions of relationships are best communicated by metaphor, the most likely system of retrieval. Not surprisingly, of the two poems to her daughters (to whom this volume is dedicated) the more poignant is the more metaphoric "Seeing the Bones." The mother receives "letters home that fall Fridays / in the box at the foot of the hill / saying the old news, keeping it neutral." She remembers:

In junior high your biology class
boiled a chicken down into its bones
four days at the simmer in my pot.
then wired joint by joint
the re-created hen
in an anatomy project
you stayed home from, sick.

Then, the real pain, the pain of loss, appears.

"Thus am I afflicted, seeing the bones."

The final five lines of the poem read:

Working backward I reconstruct
you. Send me your baby teeth, some new
nail parings and a hank of hair
and let me do the rest. I'll
set the pot to boil.

In "The Envelope" Kumin speaks of the pleasing affection which daughters often have for their mothers, of the lasting models which women become for their female offspring, and, most of all, of the tentative consolation which these truths afford one who ponders the irretrievability of one's mother's life, or one's own.

Like those old pear-shaped Russian dolls that open at the middle to reveal another and another, down to the pea-sized, irreducible minim, may we carry our mothers forth in our bellies. My we, borne onward by our daughters, ride in the Envelope of Almost-Infinity, that chain letter good for the next twenty-five thousand days of our lives.

Even the nature poems in *The Retrieval System,* striking in their beauty or stirring in their forebodingness, reinforce the book's central theme: the pain of loss. In "Territory" Kumin recounts the death of the toad mangled by the power mower: "... he goes on / lopsidedly hopping until his mother runs out." "How It Goes On" concludes,

The lamb, whose time has come,
goes off in the cab of the dump truck,
tied to the seat with baling twine,
durable enough to bear her to the knife and rafter.
O Lambs! The whole wolf-world sits down to eat
and cleans its muzzle after.

Even poems which appear, at first, simply pastoral actually deal with either the acceptance of or strife against the life-death cycle that nature dramatizes. "July, Against Hunger," an evocative description of haying time on a farm, proceeds in Proustian fashion as "The smell collects, elusive, sweet," into the poet's particular recollections of gray nights flicked with the snake tongue of heat lightning, when the grownups sat late on the side porch talking politics, foreclosures, war, and Roosevelt.

The poem's second strophe deals with the irretrievable losses of middle age as well as with the confusing yet inevitable merging of past and present as one grows older:

Loneliness fills me like a pitcher.
The old deaths dribble out . . . . . .
Meanwhile, a new life kicks in the mare.
Meanwhile, the poised sky opens on rain.
The time on either side of *now* stands fast
glinting like jagged window glass.

The poem's final sentences are defiant□as if to strike back at the mental and spiritual hunger of this July:

There are limits, my God, to what I can heft
in this heat! Clearly, the Great Rat waits,
who comes all winter to gnaw on iron
or wood, and tears the last flesh from the bone.
But if "July, Against Hunger" protests loss, the final poems in the book are beautiful representations of what it means to accept how the natural world retrieves itself. After describing the many serendipitous mortal things which surprise with joy or horrify with their "naturalness"□a frog in the old outdoor bathtub; two white-throated sparrows, singing; a dog which "brings in one half a rank / woodchuck no angel spoke up for"□Kumin ends the final poem in the book, "A Mortal Day of No Surprises," with thirteen lucky lines. They sum up some of her acceptance of the potentials for and limitations of mortal retrievability:
When I'm scooped out of here
all things animal
and unsurprised will carry on.
Frogs still will fall into those
stained old tubs we fill
with trickles from the garden hose.
Another blue-green prince will sit
like a friend of the family
guarding the doomspout.
Him asquat at the drainhole,
me gone to crumbs in the ground
and someone else's mare to call
to the stallion.

In a poet's sixth book, we expect wise and purposeful construction. Within *The Retrieval System,* a sure and satisfying connection exists between the poems concerning Anne Sexton's death and those devoted to a portrait of Henry Manley, Kumin's rural neighbor. Henry Manley represents one who endures. He is a "rich example" of how to live a soul-building life. Manley does not suffer Kumin's kind of pain from loss, because he is even more connected to the natural world. In "The Food Chain" the poet describes Henry filling her pond with a "double tub of brookies" and warning her against kingfishers (of which he would rid himself with his air rifle) and martens:

He stands there, busy with his wrists, and looking
savage.
Knowing he knows we'll hook his brookies
once they're a sporting size, I try for something
but all the words stay netted in my mouth.
Henry waves, guns the engine. His wheels spin
then catch.

The last poem of the Manley sequence, "Henry Manley, Living Alone, Keeps Time," describes how life, for the aging, narrows to the essentials.

For Henry these are, ultimately, *"Coffee. Coffee Cup. Watch."* Henry sits
stiff
at the bruised porcelain table
saying them over, able
to with only the slightest catch.

But even though "Terror sweeps him from room to room," Henry Manley seems to dwell with more submission to his fate than does metropolitan man:

Knowing how much he weighed once
he knows how much he has departed his life.
Especially he knows how the soul
can slip out of the body unannounced
like that helium-filled balloon
he opened his fingers on, years back.

There are dimensions of the poems in *The Retrieval System* which are more brilliantly "Kuminesque" than ever before: a language musical and lyrical, yet tough; reality re-imagined, as metaphor; a nearly fearless excavation into the unconscious; an attempt to make matter more palatable by locating spirit. Some of the poems here show flaws, of course. I notice most the occasional, forced tropes. It is arbitrary, for example, to compare time to a puppy (in "Waiting Inland"), and heavy- handed to say that one's time is like "unwashed dogfood cans" ("Progress Report"). Occasionally, there are lines which are much too flat, even when they are intended to represent a flaccidity or emptiness within the subject matter or theme of the poem. The lines ending "Remembering Pearl Harbor at the Tutankhamen Exhibit," already quoted, fall into this category. Another example of this shortcoming occurs at the end of "Making the Connection":

Brother,
Brother Dog, is that who you were?
Is that who I was?

But the majority of Kumin's poems work well. Most of her music is fine, her ear for rhyme, and for the combination of melodious sounds, excellent. Listen, for instance, to

the pleasing consonant consistencies, alliterations, and line breaks which create the right rhythms to describe a peaceful pastoral scene in its demise□the first strophe of "The Henry Manley Blues":

Henry Manley's house, unpainted for
eighty years, shrinks as attached sheds crease
and fold like paper wings. An elm tree sheers
the sitting porch off in a winter storm.
And Henry's fields are going under, where
the beavers have shut down a local stream
flooding his one cash crop, neat rows of pines
he'd planned to harvest for Christmases to come.
Their tips are beanpoles now, sticking up through
ice.
We skate on the newborn pond, we thump on the
roof
of the lodge and squat there, listening for life.

Maxine Kumin's life, as she knows, and her writing career, is indeed past its mid-point. Her poems in *The Retrieval System* are, in general, far better than those which she put in her first fine book, *Halfway.* Over twenty years later, Kumin's mature vision of what it means to sustain one's life is not only more compelling than it was in 1957, but her voice is less formal, more convincing, even more human, surely more "sincere." More than *Halfway,* more than *The Privilege* (1965), more than *The Nightmare Factory* (1970), more, even, than *Up Country* (1972), for which she won the Pulitzer Prize, more than *House, Bridge, Fountain, Gate* (1975), *The Retrieval System* will return to us and return us to Kumin's compassion; her dry-eyed sensitivity; her exemplary choices to live on, even with pain, rather than to give up; her transformation of matter into spirit, body into soul. Perhaps these poems will be discovered to be the best system by which to retrieve Maxine Kumin in decades to come.

Source: Sybil P. Estess, "Past Halfway: *The Retrieval System,* by Maxine Kumin," in *Iowa Review,* Vol. 10, No. 4, Fall 1979, pp. 99-109.

Adaptations

An audio tape from *Poets in Person: A Series on American Poets and Their Art,* featuring an interview with Kumin, was published by the Modern Poetry Association in 1991. The interview is titled "Maxine Kumin in Conversation with Alicia Ostriker," and the tape is widely distributed.

In 1979, the Academy of American Poets recorded and produced an audio tape of a Kumin reading. Titled simply "Maxine Kumin," the sixty-minute tape contains selections from her first book through *The Retrieval System,* as well as an introduction by poet Jane Shore.

Topics for Further Study

What creation myth may Kumin have in mind in the first stanza of the poem? What similar cultures or myth is this associated with and why do many creation stories span so many different cultures and time periods?

Kumin and Sexton were close friends and fellow poets, yet their work is remarkably different. Discuss some differences in theme, voice, and style, and also try to note similarities.

What world religions include the presence of angels in their doctrines? Discuss some of them, if any, that address Kumin's contention that heavenly beings are unable to help when humans need it most.

If you have had a pet or favorite animal in your life, describe what effect the animal had or has on your own human behavior, moods, or attitudes.

What Do I Read Next?

Kumin's collection of selected works from her first six books is called *Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief,* and it includes "Address to the Angels." Published in 1982, this book also contains previously unpublished poems and provides a good, overall look at the spectrum of Kumin's work in the first two decades of her writing career.

Most readers who like Kumin's poetry also enjoy Sexton's, despite the obvious differences. *The Complete Poems: Anne Sexton* (1981) is the most comprehensive collection of Sexton's poetry on the market. Fittingly, its foreword is written by Kumin.

One of the most recent interviews with Kumin appeared in *Atlantic Unbound,* the online version of the *Atlantic Monthly* . Published on February 6, 2002, this interview by Erin Rogers, titled "The Art of Living," is a candid talk with the poet as she comments on such various topics as her near fatal horse-driving accident, Sexton's death, and her own poetic response to September 11, 2001.

After journalist Pierre Jovanovic was suddenly thrown to the side by a mysterious force as a bullet crashed through the windshield of his car, he began an investigation into the presence of angels on earth. The result was *An Inquiry into the Existence of Guardian Angels* (1997).

Further Study

Agran, Rick, Hildred Crill, and Mark DeCarteret, eds., *Under the Legislature of Stars: 62 New Hampshire Poets,* Oyster River Press, 1999.

As the title suggests, this book collects the work of poets who possess a certain New England quality in their work, including Kumin. Kumin, also writing the introduction, says that along with the "roses or lilies" contained in the collection, one will also find "thistles . . . and bind weed, even the . . . sting of nettle, which is as it should be." This is a good look at poets from this region of the United States.

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

This book is a must-read for Kumin fans. Its comprehensive essays by fellow poets are wonderfully written and provide a thorough look at Kumin's poetry from the early days through the late 1990s.

Kumin, Maxine, *Always Beginning: Essays on a Life in Poetry,* Copper Canyon Press, 2000.

This recent collection of essays offers an intriguing look at the various elements of Kumin's life, from contemporary country living to her friendship with Sexton. The prose is insightful, humorous, and easily accessible to all readers.

□, *In Deep,* Viking Penguin Inc., 1987.

Anyone who wants to understand where Kumin and her poetry really come from should read this collection of prose pieces. The subtitle and content of such titles as "Life on a Hill," "The Mushroom Hunt," "Two Foals," and "The Poet and the Mule" emphasize the true inspiration for her work.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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