

Past Halfway: *The Retrieval System*, By Maxine Kumin · Sybil P. Estess

*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 Anne 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 day-long 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.<sup>1</sup> 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

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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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 estatic.  
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 Blooms-

berg / 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 shit 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 forbodingness, 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 doomsput.  
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 "Kumin-esque" 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.

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NOTES

- 1 I refer to a planned conversation I had with Kumin, concerning my writing of an encyclopedia article on her life and work, in October, 1977, at LaGuardia airport. See also: Susan Toth, "Fresh Air in the Garret: A Visit with Maxine Kumin." *Ms.* June, 1978, p. 37.
- 2 In a Women's Writers' Conference at the University of Texas at Austin, January 19-21, 1979, Kumin remarked that when she discovered her writing was not determined by her relationship with Sexton, she was greatly encouraged.
- 3 "Maxine Kumin's Survival," *The American Poetry Review*, November/December, 1978, Vol. 7, No. 6, p. 18.