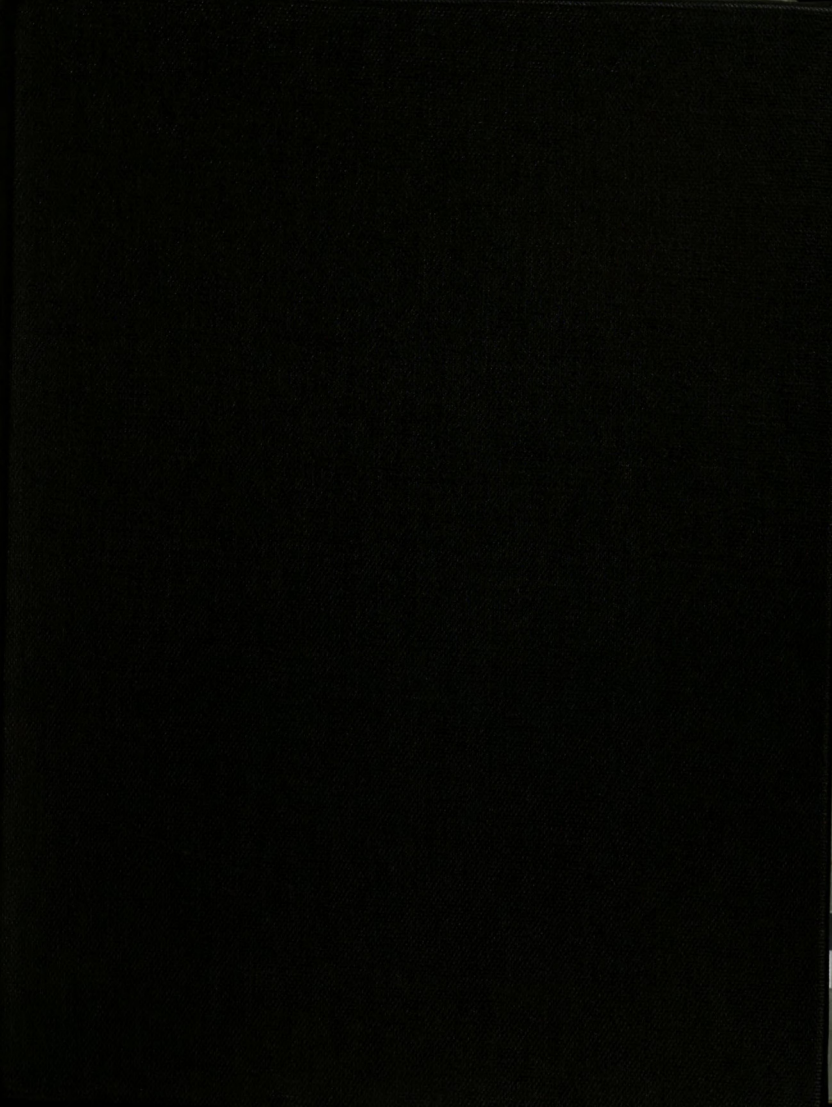




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MAKING THE CONNECTION: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS
OF MAXINE KUMIN'S POETRY

VOLUME I

By

Cheryl Lynn Vossekuil

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of English

1988

ABSTRACT

MAKING THE CONNECTION: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS
OF MAXINE KUMIN'S POETRY

By

Cheryl Lynn Vossekuil

This dissertation treats the main themes revealed throughout Maxine Kumin's poetry. Kumin is most concerned with the experience of loss--loss incurred first as a lack of certainty about the world, then loss in more concrete forms as those she loves die. Through metaphor Kumin "retrieves" her lost ones by transforming them into poetic images. Coping with loss, particularly as manifested in spiritual quest, is a theme that pervades and orders other themes as well, including: the Jew in a Christian society; the daughter/mother/daughter continuum; and the finding of a divine presence, a ruling order, in nature.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of Kumin's life--particularly important because there is often little barrier between poet and persona; this chapter also presents an overview of the critical reception of Kumin's work and places that work in the context of other contemporary American poetry. Chapter 2 introduces the theme of loss, describing the numerous manifestations of the theme within Kumin's oeuvre. Chapter 3 presents Kumin's self-described concept of retrieval: poetic/metaphoric reclamation of loss through language and image. Chapter 4 examines poetic manifestations of the Jew

in a Christian society, a theme at first overt in Kumin's work and later more covert. Chapter 5 treats the theme of the daughter/mother/daughter continuum; Kumin finds hope--and perhaps immortality--in the matrilinear progression. Chapter 6 discusses Kumin's nature poetry. A self-described agnostic, the poet reconciles her search for a divine being within nature. Her efforts to transcend loss and to find certitude within her life culminate in her recognition of the comforting presence of life-cycles and order within nature.

Kumin's precise use of language, her meticulous attention to details, her skillful use of form and rhyme in an age which considers them archaic, her controlled and measured treatment of the most pressing issues in human life, and her philosophical reclamation of loss through poetry/metaphor, make her a distinct and unique voice in twentieth-century contemporary poetry. In an era which dictates what its poets must be and must do, Kumin defies categorization.

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1988

TO CURT

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For their support, assistance, and unwavering love, I am grateful to my parents, Alice Jellema Vossekuil and Norman W. Vossekuil.

I am indebted to my major professor, Dr. Linda W. Wagner-Martin, whose guidance, encouragement, and friendship have been strong and positive forces in my life for the past decade. I am most appreciative of my committee, Dr. Cathy N. Davidson, Dr. James L. Hill, and Dr. Marcellette G. Williams. Dr. Alan Hollingsworth, formerly a member of my committee, also provided assistance and insight.

I am deeply grateful to Maxine Kumin for allowing me to interview her at length during May of 1987, for her thoughtful and open responses to my many questions, for permitting me to attend her poetry seminar at The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and for her warm and gracious reception during my visit. Her poetry has touched, and has forever enriched, my life.

Many thanks to Maria Bruno, Karen Graehme Hall, Susan Howard, Sheryl Meyering, Leonora Anderson Smith, Jackie Campbell, John Hagen, R. Glenn Wright, S.T. Fish, Sheila Roberts, K. Laurel Balkema, Luanne Epstein, Nancy Merson, Ross Hershberger, Guy Bachman, Lynn Domina. I also thank Craig and Loni Vossekuil, Skip and Sandra Vossekuil Cone, Marcia Dykstra Howe, and my grandmother, Eileen Wahl Jellema.

I am indebted to the Department of English and the College of Arts and Letters for the fellowship which enabled me to complete a large portion of this dissertation. Warm thanks also to Howard Anderson and Lorraine Hart.

I am grateful to TRW for its assistance in completing the degree and to my colleagues there: Robert B. Donovan, Donald A. Guetig, Frederick J. Maley, Denise Foster, Rudy Prater, Sarah Gibson, and Cheryl Williams.

Finally, I thank Curtis J. Martin, whose extraordinary love, warmth, honesty, and good humor have sustained me throughout this dissertation and beyond.

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CHAPTER 1 Introduction

I. Maxine Kumin was born June 6, 1925 in Germantown, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Philadelphia--an ironic birthplace given her Jewish heritage.¹ Daughter of Peter and Doll (Simon) Winokur, pawnbroker and erstwhile pianist respectively, the young Maxine was predictably unhappy as a child; Kumin notes that: "Behind every writer stands an unhappy childhood."² Her dissatisfaction due, in part, to difficulties in her relationship with her mother, Kumin

¹ An awareness of Kumin's life enhances understanding of her poetry. Robert Bly insists that American poetry has taken a wrong turn because it is "a poetry in which the poem is considered to be a construction independent of the poet. It is imagined that when the poet says 'I' in a poem he does not mean himself, but rather some other person--'the poet'--a dramatic hero. The poem is conceived as a clock which one sets going. This idea encourages the poet to construct automated and flawless machines. Such poems have thousands of intricately moving parts, dozens of iambic belts and pulleys, precision trippers that rhyme at the right moment, flashing alternately red and green, steam valves that whistle like birds. This is the admired poem.... The great poets of this century have written their poems in exactly the opposite way. In the poems of Neruda, Vallejo, Jiminez, Machado, Rilke, the poem is an extension of the substance of the man, no different from his skin or his hands. The substance of the man who wrote the poem reaches far out into the darkness and the poem is his whole body, seeing with his ears and his fingers and his hair." (Robert Bly, "A Wrong Turning in American Poetry," in Claims for Poetry, ed. Donald Hall (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982) 23-24.)

² Karla Hammond, "An Interview With Maxine Kumin," Western Humanities Review, 33.1 (Winter 1979): 1-15; rpt. Karla Hammond, "An Interview With Maxine Kumin," in To Make A Prairie, ed. Maxine Kumin (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1979) 49.

remembers: "I was very much a disappointment to my mother, who wanted me to be beautiful, radiant, a snazzy dresser, terribly popular. Instead of which I was an overweight, cross-eyed frump. For years and years and years. And rather withdrawn."³

This troubled relationship with her mother--resolved later in Kumin's life--figures significantly in her poetry. In contrast to her problems with her mother, however, Kumin remembers that she and her father were "very close...in a clumsy, inarticulate, nonverbal way."⁴ Caught between an inarticulate, though caring, father and a disapproving mother, the child-poet started to write: "I began to express myself from early on--in secret, in diaries, in all sorts of ways. I guess I was a closet poet from the age of eight."⁵ And while neither of her parents was influential or encouraging to the budding writer, neither discouraged her either.⁶

Another significant cause of her early unhappiness was the fact that, although Jewish by heritage, young Maxine was sent to a convent school for several years "during that critical period that Jesuits refer to." Although she developed "wonderful relationships" with some of the nuns

³ Georgia Litwack, "A Conversation With Maxine Kumin, Poet," Harvard Magazine, LXXIX (Jan.-Feb. 1977) 65.

⁴ Litwack, 65.

⁵ Litwack, 65.

⁶ Hammond, 49.

in this convent next to her home, "they instilled in [her] tremendous anxiety about [her] immortal soul."⁷ Her early religious education left Kumin searching for certitudes, a spiritual quest that continues to pervade her poetry: "to a child who is looking for absolutes these two opposing views of the world [Judaism and Catholicism] are terribly confusing. You really come out of the womb looking for absolute simple truths to guide by, and you spend the rest of your life learning that just staying alive is a compliment. That's why I wrote so much about these ambivalent feelings."⁸

Kumin's search for absolutes is one that she has in common with many other women, particularly writers. Carol P. Christ describes this process of spiritual quest in Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest. Kumin's and others' spiritual quests will center on naming "the great power or powers of being...from their own perspective and to recognize their participation in them. Women need to recognize that their participation in the life and death forces in all natural processes means that they have as much right to exist and to affirm their value

⁷ Joan Norris, "An Interview With Maxine Kumin," Crazy Horse, 16 (Summer 1975); rpt. in To Make A Prairie, ed. Maxine Kumin (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979) 12.

⁸ Hammond, 60.

as every other being."⁹ Overwhelmingly, Christ notes, women writers--Kumin among them--resolve their spiritual quests within nature.

The pursuit of absolutes was complicated for the poet by the fact that she was a Jewish child, living in safety and comfort, while in Nazi Germany Jews--many of whom were her relatives--were being murdered. Consequently, Kumin's Jewish heritage became a source of guilt beyond that which she incorporated through attending a convent school. Kumin identifies herself as someone who "lived through the war as a small child full of guilt for being a safe American Jew."¹⁰ "Although [she] lived in a safe America, [her] father's relatives were going into the ovens."¹¹ The guilt the poet felt over her complicated status as a Jew--educated by Catholics, living safely in a Protestant American society--found its way into her poetry, especially in her early work as she struggled to come to terms with her position as a Jew in a Christian society. Her knowledge that her father's relatives were being murdered while she was safe--and realizing that had she been in Germany at the time she too might have been killed--began to create for the young poet a malevolent underside, a

⁹ Christ, Diving Deep..., 10-11.

¹⁰ Hammond, 8.

¹¹ Virginia Elson and Beverlee Hughes, "An Interview With Maxine Kumin," Yes: A Magazine of Poetry 4.3 (Spring-Summer 1974); rpt; Maxine Kumin. To Make A Prairie. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979) 9.

world of nightmare, lurking just beneath the surface of her daily life.

In addition to struggling for religious identity and undergoing a loss of innocence as she perceived an underside to life, the young poet found two sustaining passions, swimming and horses, both of which appear throughout Kumin's work. For quite some time she had Olympic aspirations, and longed to attend Wellesley "because they had a magnificent pool with an underwater observatory."¹² Placed on a waiting list at Wellesley, instead, she went to Radcliffe where she was captain of the swim team. Swimming and water imagery in general continue to permeate her work, and led one reviewer to describe Kumin's first book as "amphibious, so much of it takes place in the water."¹³ Similarly, the image of the horse is also particularly significant in her work, so much so that one critic complained: "I just wish she'd quit writing about her damn horse."¹⁴ Kumin speaks of her passion for horses:

I think that for me animals in general have
always represented a kind of lost innocence, a
kind of special sanctity and purity. Because my

¹² Norris, 13.

¹³ Peter Davison, "Self-Revelation In The New Poetry," Atlantic Monthly Nov. 1961: 170.

¹⁴ Quotation not documented; Jean Gould, "Anne Sexton-Maxine Kumin," in her Modern American Women Poets (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1984) 175.

own world view is fairly dark. I'm a humanist, et cetera, but a sneaky secret side of me thinks that human nature is depraved, and I don't find that depravity in the animal kingdom. I find instinct, and simplicity, and it's a very healing kind of thing to deal with animals. You can predict how they're going to respond.¹⁵

Kumin's love of horses is perhaps most manifested in her "Amanda" sequence--poems presenting a persona unwavering in her adulation for the mare, Amanda--a symbol of lost innocence and a creature in total harmony with nature.

While at Radcliffe, Kumin majored in History and Literature, studying both French and Russian, and received an A.B. in 1946. Later that same year, she married Victor Kumin, an engineer. She received her M.A. from Radcliffe in 1948, and gave birth to the first of three children within a month of finishing the degree.

During the following incredibly busy time of babies and housework and domestic "bliss," the poet did not write, due overwhelmingly to an experience in a previous college class:

I gave the instructor a sheaf of poems and about six weeks later he gave them back to me. He had written on the front: 'Say it with flowers, but, for God's sake, don't try to write poems.' That

¹⁵ Litwack, 67-68.

just closed me off. I didn't try to write another poem for about six years.¹⁶

Later Kumin learned that this instructor similarly advised any female student. So, for some time after finishing her M.A., the poet followed the life-patterns prescribed for young wives and mothers in the 1950's--but she was unhappy:

I was programmed into one kind of life, which was to say: get a college degree, get married, and have a family.... And I came to poetry as a way of saving myself because I was so wretchedly discontented, and I felt so guilty about being discontented. It just wasn't enough to be a housewife and a mother. It didn't gratify great chunks of me. I came to poetry purely for self-gratification.¹⁷

One is reminded here of Esther Greenwood in The Bell Jar, who struggled to find an identity, to birth herself despite the role which society so forcefully dictated. Eventually, Kumin began writing:

I started writing light verse for the slicks when I got pregnant with Danny, for a year.... And I made a pact with myself that if I didn't sell anything by the time this child was born, I would

¹⁶ Norris, 18.

¹⁷ Martha George Meek, "An Interview With Maxine Kumin," Massachusetts Review 16 (Spring, 1975) 317-27; rpt. Maxine Kumin, To Make A Prairie (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979) 31.

chuck all my creative discontents. And in about my eighth month I started really landing with little four-liners, there, here and everywhere. Saturday Evening Post and Cosmopolitan, and so on. Then someone told me about John Holmes's class at the Center and in great fear and trembling I went and met Anne. We did that thing at the Center for a year and then we broke off and started a workshop of our own.¹⁸

Consisting of Kumin, Anne Sexton, George Starbuck, Sam Albert, John Holmes, and Ted Weiss for a time, this workshop--conducted at the Boston Center for Adult Education--provided Kumin with the impetus to take her poetry seriously and introduced her to Anne Sexton, who would become an important figure in Kumin's life.

Maxine Kumin and Anne Sexton were best friends in poetry and in life for over eighteen years, until Sexton's 1974 suicide. Having met in John Holmes' workshop, they provided each other with support and criticism--though one supposes Sexton gained most--speaking with each other and workshopping poems daily over the phone, for hours on end. They even went so far as to install a private line between

¹⁸ Elaine Showalter and Carol Smith, "A Nurturing Relationship: A Conversation With Anne Sexton and Maxine Kumin, April 15, 1974," Women's Studies 4 (1976) 12-13.

their homes when their husbands complained of their always tying up the [phone] line.¹⁹ In an interview with Diana Hume George, Kumin speaks of her closeness to Sexton:

I think in each other's lives we fulfilled a desire for sisterhood that had gone long unfulfilled.... She was someone in my life that I was extremely close to and I knew exactly how she felt and what she was going through. She had all my regard and sympathy and affection, and I guess I had all of hers. A day never passed that we didn't speak, on the phone if we didn't see each other, usually several times a day.²⁰

Kumin and Sexton had much to offer each other as friends and as critics, even naming each other's books--Kumin's Up Country: Poems of New England and Sexton's Transformations, to name just two.²¹ Kumin's friendship and support helped to keep Sexton alive in her last desperate years before the 1974 "successful" suicide, and indeed, Kumin was the last person to see Sexton alive.

Kumin's and Sexton's literary lives are inextricably intertwined though their poetry differs greatly. Unjustly living in Sexton's shadow for a number of years, Kumin is known to many readers as Anne Sexton's best friend much in

¹⁹ Showalter and Smith, 120-21.

²⁰ Diana Hume George, "Kumin on Kumin and Sexton: An Interview," Poesis 6.2 (1985) 5-6.

²¹ Showalter and Smith, 131.

the same way that Anne Sexton is linked to Sylvia Plath for numerous reasons (though in actuality, Sexton and Plath had very little contact--essentially, they spent time together for the period of one year). Throughout her career, Kumin has often been a subject of interest as a result of her friendship with Sexton rather than (and more appropriately) as an accomplished poet in her own right.

Nevertheless, understanding Kumin's relationship with Sexton is crucial to understanding her development as a poet. For these two women had a symbiotic relationship for a number of years, championing each other and each other's poetry and spurring each other to write and to improve. Anne Sexton speaks of her relationship with Kumin and of talking with her on the phone:

We might just be talking, and I'd say, we're just talking. Why the hell aren't we writing? And we'd get a line, a concept. I'd say, I'll call you back in twenty minutes. It is the most stimulating thing. It's a challenge.... We hang up. In twenty-five minutes I call back. Have you got anything? She sure does. And so have I. It forces us. It's the challenge of it.²²

Because the two were so close (though less so toward the end of Sexton's life), Sexton's suicide was a source of profound grief for Kumin, as one might imagine. This loss

²² Showalter and Smith, 127.

of her best friend was one loss of many which Kumin suffered. The others included her father, her mother, her brother--in young adulthood from the debilitating and dehumanizing A.L.S., Lou Gehrig's disease--a brother's child, and an early close friend from suicide during a post-partum depression. These deaths resulted in the poet's search for meaning, as her poems show; Kumin's poetry reflects her coping with, making sense of, and transcending loss. By finding a sense of order in nature, the poet is able to reconcile herself to the ever-present reality of loss--loss in death as well as loss in other forms: loss of innocence; loss of certitude; loss of youth; loss of beloved animals; loss of children as they mature and move away.

Maxine Kumin has been prolific, despite the fact that during her early years of writing she was also raising three children and tending house:

When my kids were very little--in grammar school or a combination of kindergarten and grammar school--the minute they left home in the morning I went to my desk. I never got dressed. I didn't do dishes. I didn't make the bed. I didn't do the laundry. I didn't do anything. I went immediately to my desk.... When they came home at noon it was to this slovenly mother in her bathrobe, and we all jollied around together

and had lunch. The small kids stayed home; they didn't go back for afternoon session until they were in third grade. I always had some little thing toddling around, and that was fine. I mean, it was very easy to make a bed, do the dishes, do the laundry together. That's very companionable because we all know what scut work is.²³

The poet recalls that she "managed badly [with three small children]. I learned to write in the eye of the hurricane. I learned to work in twenty-minute interstices of time whenever I could grab them. And it made me tough and single-minded."²⁴ Speaking further of her role as writer/wife/mother/housekeeper/teacher, Kumin recalls:

I was writing in a corner of the bedroom, my kids were about seven or eight before they understood that the rest of the world didn't have afternoon rest periods. On this particular day, my middle child was very cross with me.... We were all in our rooms having our 'rest' period. I was working on my poems. Under the door came an envelope. Inside there was a note written in an obviously disguised foreign hand which read: 'Dear Mrs. Kumin: I think your stories are

²³ Enid Shomer and Sheffield Sanford, "An Interview With Maxine Kumin," Helicon Nine May 1985: 45.

²⁴ Litwack, 72.

terrible, your poems are worse. I hope they never sell. Signed: A Well-Wisher.'²⁵

Kumin found time to write. But getting published, at first, was another matter for a woman at that time. Kumin and Sexton met many obstacles, including the male editor who said: "'I really wish I could print that but I printed a woman last month.'"²⁶

Suzanne Juhasz writes of the difficulty women writers encounter in her Naked and Fiery Forms, Modern American Poetry by Women: A New Tradition.²⁷ If the publishing world reacted poorly to the notion of publishing women, that was often the least of the hurdles she had to overcome; other, more primary obstacles concerned such elemental ideas as society's perceiving poets and women as mutually exclusive roles. Juhasz terms this perception the "double bind":

Being a woman poet is a peculiar social and psychological situation, to which the poetry that women write is related. For the poem does not spring fully formed from a father's head: it is created by a woman who is in and of the world. To be a woman poet in our society is a double-

²⁵ Shelley Armitage, "An Interview With Maxine Kumin," Paintbrush 7&8 (Spring & Autumn 1980/81) 56.

²⁶ Armitage, 56.

²⁷ Suzanne Juhasz, Naked and Fiery Forms, Modern American Poetry by Women: A New Tradition (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

bind situation, one of conflict and strain. For the words 'woman' and 'poet' denote opposite and contradictory qualities and roles. Traditionally, the poet is a man, and 'poetry' is the poems that men write. The long history of Western literature makes this point painfully clear. It is men who make art, who make books; women make babies.²⁸

If and when a woman manages to overcome the inner conflict of defining herself by profession rather than personal relationships, as is standard, she must live with the fact that "she is set up to lose, whatever she might do. The conflict between her two 'selves' is an excruciating and irreconcilable civil war, when both sides are in fact the same person. If she is 'woman,' she must fail as 'poet'; 'poet,' she must fail as woman.... Women's poetry is special if only because it comes out of this peculiar tension in their lives as artists. The power of that tension must be recognized, for it can lead to destruction as well as creation and too frequently has done so."²⁹; witness the demise of Plath and Sexton, for example.

Even should a woman surmount the barriers that would keep her from writing,

²⁸ Juhasz, Naked and Fiery Forms..., 1.

²⁹ Juhasz, Naked and Fiery Forms..., 2.

If and when a woman chooses to be a poet, the double-bind exists within the writing itself. Her models have all been men; her criteria and standards of excellence have been created by men describing the work of men. Because the masculine has always been the norm in our society, familiarity with the nature of masculine expression and its formalization in art is long-standing and to a great extent determines our very definitions and evaluations of art. The few women writers who have written and whose names have survived are either thought of as minor artists or have achieved superior status despite their womanhood. Yet a woman's experience of the world and manner of experiencing the world (the two are part of one act and cannot be separated) is 'feminine,' not only when she is menstruating or giving birth but when she is teaching a class or talking to a friend. Whether or not there is any significant biological element affecting the ways in which women think and behave, it is a fact that women in real ways are different from men.³⁰

Unlike male poets, female poets must constantly define themselves in opposition to mainstream ideas; they are

³⁰ Juhasz, Naked and Fiery Forms..., 3.

always "other"--while male poets are simply referred to as poets, female poets always have the word "woman" appended to poet--as do people of color. The implication is that there are poets and there are other kinds of poets: women poets, Black poets, Hispanic poets, lesbian poets. Such artists must constantly define/evaluate themselves in terms of literary tradition--come to signify the poetic tradition of white males--and, consequently, their work must respond to this challenge in some way. The concept of the "double-bind" is crucial in evaluating any type of "other" poet, and therefore, most certainly applies to Kumin.

Alicia Suskin Ostriker agrees that the position of a woman poet in twentieth century America is a unique one. Consider the notion, for example, that the highest praise to be accorded to a woman writer was "to say that they do not write like most other women."³¹ Furthermore, Ostriker asserts:

we cannot measure the work of women poets, past or present, without a thorough--and if possible demystified--awareness of the critical context in which they have composed and continue to compose their work. We need to recognize that our customary literary language is systematically gendered in ways that influence what we approve

³¹ Alicia Suskin Ostriker, Stealing the Language, The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986) 2.

and disapprove of, making it extremely difficult for us to acknowledge certain kinds of originality--of difference--in women poets.³²

Hence, it is crucial to understand Kumin's life as a human being to better understand her life as a poet.

The list of Maxine Kumin's published works is impressive: eight books of poetry, four novels, a collection of short fiction, two books of essays, and twenty-two children's books, as well as numerous essays, short stories, poems, and translations of poems. In addition, having published one collection of essays in 1987, she will publish another book of poetry--to be titled Nurture³³--and one of short fiction within the coming year.

Her list of honors is equally impressive. She has already garnered the following awards, among others:

1960	Lowell Mason Palmer Award
1961-3	Radcliffe Institute Scholar
1966	National Endowment for the Arts Grant
1968	William Marion Reedy Award
1972	Eunice Tietjens Memorial Prize
1973	Pulitzer Prize for <u>Up Country: Poems of New England</u>

³² Ostriker, Stealing the Language..., 2.

³³ Personal interview with Kumin, 10-11 May 1987.

- 1978 Radcliffe College Award
- 1981-2 Poetry Consultant, The Library of Congress
- 1981 Guggenheim Fellowship
- 1985 Academy of American Poets Fellowship

In addition, she has been awarded numerous honorary degrees and has taught at institutions such as M.I.T., Princeton, Brandeis, Columbia, Washington University, and elsewhere.

Having raised their children in a suburb of Boston, Kumin and her husband moved to their farm in Warner, New Hampshire a number of years ago. They continue to live there full-time, raising horses and other animals and tending a large garden. While Kumin must venture into the world to teach and to give readings, she detests leaving her farm and her animals: "although I have a public face and I like people, I really hate leaving home. I'm a lousy traveler; I never want to be gone from the farm, I'm always in mourning when I'm away, I can't wait to get back--and it's tough. I don't have enough time for myself, or my horses."³⁴ Despite her dislike of traveling, however, Kumin gives numerous readings and teaches regularly, in order to support her "horse habit."³⁵

³⁴ George, 1.

³⁵ George, 2.

II. Little criticism has been written on Kumin's work other than some 300 book reviews. Published in respected and prominent journals, these reviews encompass her children's books and essays as well as her poetry and fiction. Many of these articles, however, are fewer than 100 words in length.

Several essays written on female poets include attention to Kumin--most often in discussions of Plath, Sexton, Levertov, or Rich. A few books mention Kumin as well. Also, there are four dissertations which treat Kumin (mine is the first on Kumin exclusively) and two theses solely on her--one a standard thesis entitled "The Poetic Voice and The Romantic Tradition in the Poetry of Maxine Kumin"³⁶ and the other a bibliography of her works through 1980.³⁷ And there have been eleven published interviews with Kumin, as well as my own unpublished interview of May 1987.

Because the critical attention paid to Kumin has come largely in the form of book reviews, I think it helpful to provide a survey of them. Consequently, the balance of this section provides an overview of the reviews so that the reader might gain an understanding of the critical

³⁶ Beverly Dianne Barton, "The Poetic Voice and the Romantic Tradition in the Poetry of Maxine Kumin," M.A. thesis, North Texas State University, 1979.

³⁷ Arleen P. Bickers, "A Bibliography of the Works of Maxine W. Kumin 1960-1980," M.A. thesis, Memphis State University, 1982. Bickers' bibliography contains a number of inaccuracies in the listing of citations.

reception of Kumin's work.

Maxine Kumin published her first book of poetry, Halfway, in 1961.³⁸ Reviews of this first book are generally favorable although a few of them "damn with faint praise" and others take her to task for various reasons. Louis Simpson, for example, terms Kumin "intelligent, skillful, and perceptive," and points out her "sharp vision and authentic feeling." He takes issue with Kumin, however, insisting that her poetry "well done though it is...is almost entirely a verse of statement. There is no mystery in it...once more we are confronted with the attitudes and tone of prose in the form of verse."³⁹ This assessment is particularly interesting because Kumin considers herself a formalist and feels most comfortable when writing within a traditional, strict, structural scheme. In addition, Simpson's comments on Kumin are typical in that most of the reviews of her work follow a "Kumin-has-the-following-to-recommend-her-but" pattern, in which several comments or judgments, ranging in enthusiasm from admiring to anemic, are followed by a caveat that takes her to task for perceived shortcomings.

³⁸ Maxine Kumin, Halfway (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1961). Within the body of the dissertation--excluding the introduction, references to this work will be noted parenthetically within the text using H as an abbreviation for the title, Halfway.

³⁹ Louis Simpson, "Important and Unimportant Poems," Hudson Review 14.3 (Autumn 1961) 469-70.

In reviewing Halfway, Peter Davison noted that "the movement of her poems is like swimming--rhythmic, sparkling, easy, full of shifts of light and a continuous liquid flow of sensation."⁴⁰ An especially salient comment, this, given the fact that swimming is such an integral process for Kumin. Herbert Burke

find[s] this collection of poems by Maxine Kumin both a delight and a challenge. In their firm poetic, their contemporary idiom and syntax and especially in their unique kinesthetic force they are a delight; in their deeper probings of the condition of man and of the mysteries of being they are a challenge.... In some there is a lovely humor; in others there is a deep charity; in all there is the stuff of poetry.⁴¹

Burke congratulates the author for combining a strong sense of structure and rhythm--she considers herself a formalist--with a contemporary notion of language, for example: Kumin is able to bridge the contemporary and the traditional.⁴²

⁴⁰ Peter Davison, "Self-Revelation in the New Poetry," rev. of Halfway, by Maxine Kumin, Atlantic Monthly Nov. 1961: 170.

⁴¹ Herbert Burke, Rev. of Halfway, by Maxine Kumin, Library Journal 1 Apr. 1961: 1468.

⁴² Kumin's later poetry shows a movement away from the formalism present in her earlier work. This change could be evaluated as being driven by an emerging feminist consciousness. Robin Morgan, for example, in "discussing the way in which her own evolving feminist consciousness is mirrored in her movement away from traditional forms in poetry, says: 'as the poems became more feminist and

Her first book was also favorably reviewed in The Saturday Review:

Her poems are comparatively free and simple in form, spare and colloquial in diction, dry and ironic in tone. They are feminine only because they are extraordinarily personal.... she is much concerned with the direct rendering of experience and is at her best in amused, affectionate, honest, intense apprehension of its texture. But she is no mere photographer. She can infuse her concrete, sensuous surfaces with emotions of force and subtlety....⁴³

This reviewer is pleased with Kumin because her female-ness is not a distraction for the reader: she does not discomfort the reader. The balance of the review is quite favorable, once the critic makes the point that this poetry is better because it could have been written by a man. James Dickey provides a contrasting voice on the merits of Kumin's work:

political, the content began to chafe at the strict form [I had been using] and eventually transformed it.' Adrienne Rich speaks of rejecting the formalism of her early years, which, 'like asbestos gloves...allowed me to handle materials I couldn't pick up barehanded.... Kathleen Fraser's 'The Gestate: A New Form for Women' directly voices the search for a specifically female form.'" (Quoted in Lynda Koolish, "A Whole New Poetry Beginning Here: Contemporary American Poets," diss., Stanford University, 1981, 10.

⁴³ Rev. of Halfway, by Maxine Kumin, Saturday Review 6 May 1961: 30.

Maxine Kumin is a delightfully skillful poet and a quiet, observant, unhaunted mind. And almost everybody, of course, welcomes and enjoys poetry like hers: just learned enough, able to use the myths to quite surprising purposes and advantages, quick-eyed, humanly responsible, and very readily understood. And yet there is so much of this kind of writing...it makes me unhappy to see a writer of her gifts turn out to be barely distinguishable from dozens and dozens of other young female poets...whose process of writing consists only of thinking, habitually and time after time, of just how one may make a pleasant, surprising little magic box of words of what one sees and hears, what one knows. Her work somehow concedes too much to the surface appearance of things; the transforming power that might bring us up short exclaiming 'this is a new earth and a new heaven' has no part in them.

(Emphasis mine)⁴⁴

A curious assessment, given the fact that the reviewer in Saturday Review noted that she is "no mere photographer." And William Dickey observes that "the images return always to a strict visual accuracy; behind the startling word lies

⁴⁴ James Dickey, "Correspondences and Essences," rev. of Halfway, by Maxine Kumin, Virginia Quarterly Review 37 4 (Autumn 1961) 636-7.

its solid justification."⁴⁵ James Dickey dismisses Kumin rather casually as he terms her voice "barely distinguishable from dozens and dozens of other young female poets." His reference to her "unhaunted mind" seems a thinly veiled allusion to Plath, Sexton, and other female poets whose subject matter and explicitness cause discomfort in the largely-male critical establishment.⁴⁶

In a review often quoted out-of-context for jacket blurbs, Thom Gunn terms Kumin's poetry "direct, honest, and gentle."⁴⁷ However, as this paragraph continues, Gunn asserts that:

There's nothing really wrong with [Kumin's poetry]. It is unambitious and succeeds well enough in doing what it set out to do...[but] she simply does not write with enough talent to be

⁴⁵ William Dickey, "Revelations and Homilies," rev. of Halfway, by Maxine Kumin, Poetry Nov. 1961: 126.

⁴⁶ Perhaps Dickey is uncomfortable with the anger expressed clearly in many of Sexton's and Plath's poetry. Conversely, because Kumin is a poet of understatement, she is less overt about her anger and other feelings. Michele Roberts observes that "men often can't hear women speaking as women: they can only hear anger, for example, expressed in masculine terms: aggro, smashing things up. [Roberts's] poems invite an audience to listen, to open up, to take images inside. Clearly this is threatening to some men, since it suggests a feminine activity: embracing, holding; a power they're frightened of." (Michele Roberts, "Questions and Answers," in On Gender and Writing, ed. Michelene Wandor (London: Pandora Press, 1983): 62-3. Consequently, it becomes easier to dismiss poets such as Kumin as indistinguishable from dozens of others; to view them this way makes them less threatening.

⁴⁷ Thom Gunn, "Imitations and Originals," rev. of Halfway, by Maxine Kumin, Yale Review Mar. 1962: 484.

really interesting. My final reaction to this book, though certainly not of exasperation, is of boredom.

A lackluster endorsement at best, a damning assessment at worst.

Clearly, Halfway received mixed reviews; many of the reviewers wanted Kumin to be a poet she is not. Some of them patronized her for being a woman poet, while others contended that it is not clear from her poetry that she writes from a distinctly feminine stance.

Reviews of The Privilege, published in 1965,⁴⁸ were also generally favorable, such as Robert Wallace's evaluation: "Maxine Kumin's new poems are superb. She hardly makes a mistake. Her language always catches the world into the poem, is deliciously prosy, direct, surprising..."⁴⁹ Another reviewer insists that while her poems are "dauntingly fluent, running from one line to the next with nonchalance...her poems, taken singly, are like courses in a Chinese dinner, notable for as long as they last.... [Kumin's] best poems are direct, their fluency a

⁴⁸ Maxine Kumin, The Privilege, (New York: Harper and Row, 1965). Within the body of the dissertation--excluding the introduction--any further references to this work will be made parenthetically within the text, using the abbreviation P for the title The Privilege.

⁴⁹ Robert Wallace, "Down From the Forked Hill Unsullied," rev. of The Privilege, by Maxine Kumin, Poetry May 1966: 121.

grace of tact and memory."⁵⁰

In a review which seems typical in its brevity and in its equivocation, an anonymous reviewer in Booklist notes that Kumin writes with "articulate directness...delights in technical variation and is strong on rhythm and often uses rhyme. Not a master, she is satisfyingly communicative and competent."⁵¹ A reviewer in The Beloit Poetry Journal also has mixed feelings about Kumin's second book: "when she speaks directly, she is a fine poet; when she reaches for effect, she stumbles."⁵² The reviewer in Choice, however, maintains that "a poetic voice as distinctive as this deserves inclusion in any collection of recent American poetry."⁵³ But it is Dabney Stuart who provides the most resoundingly positive evaluation of this book:

It is impossible to communicate by commentary the world these poems make. It is filled with dread and terror as well as expectancy, humor and praise. It is a world whose minutest details are observed with precision, whose smallest inhabitants are treated

⁵⁰ Denis Donoghue, "The Store of the Human," rev. of The Privilege, by Maxine Kumin, Hudson Review 18.4 (Winter 1965-66): 606.

⁵¹ Rev. of The Privilege, by Maxine Kumin, Booklist 1 Nov. 1965: 257.

⁵² Rev. of The Privilege, by Maxine Kumin, Beloit Poetry Journal 16.3 (Spring 1966): 50.

⁵³ Rev. of The Privilege, by Maxine Kumin, Choice Jan. 1966: 772.

with purpose. Perhaps it is enough to say that The Privilege fulfills art's humblest and most difficult intention--to create a world within whose limitations a compelling and intelligent identity can realize itself.⁵⁴

Kumin's The Nightmare Factory, her third book of poetry, was published in 1970.⁵⁵ As with her previous books, several critics provided unqualified rave reviews, while others received her work with mixed reactions. Robert D. Spector terms this work "a collection of wise poems, knowing in the ways of the world and the needs of people.... she writes with compassion and wit. Her sense of images strikes many original comparisons..."⁵⁶ Less enthusiastically--albeit still favorably--Dorothy Nyren observes that The Nightmare Factory "reflects an increasingly somber mood.... [Kumin's] style lends itself only moderately well to darker themes and appears to best effect in her 'pasture poems' of cows and horses and 'tribal poems' for her family. This collection of poems of

⁵⁴ Dabney Stuart, "Weights and Measures," rev. of The Privilege, by Maxine Kumin, Shenandoah 17.2 (Winter 1966): 101.

⁵⁵ Maxine Kumin, The Nightmare Factory, (New York: Harper and Row, 1970). Within the body of the dissertation--excluding the introduction--any further references to this book will be made parenthetically within the text, using the abbreviation NF for the title The Nightmare Factory.

⁵⁶ Robert D. Spector, "Betwixt Tradition and Innovation," rev. of The Nightmare Factory, by Maxine Kumin, Saturday Review 25 Dec. 1970: 24.

gentle affection and polite sorrow belongs in moderate-sized literature collections."⁵⁷

The reviewer in The Virginia Quarterly Review lauds Kumin for:

depth and range, delicately controlled yet powerful emotion, and the unobtrusive presence of formal devices.... Kumin never settles for superficial treatment of her material although she deals with an extensive range of subjects.... she manages to focus on various aspects of her familial situations without making the reader uncomfortable by the willing surrender of privacy...⁵⁸

Again, Kumin is congratulated for not making the reader uncomfortable. Perhaps Kumin's ability to treat personal subjects without surrendering her privacy is one reason that she has been relatively accepted by the largely white-male critical establishment.

Finally, a reviewer first observes that Kumin "writ[es] with subjective immediacy of personal relationships," then goes on to summarize Kumin's work as: "emotional poems that sometimes slide into slickness or sentimentality but at their best are refreshingly

⁵⁷ Dorothy Nyren, Rev. of The Nightmare Factory, by Maxine Kumin, Library Journal 1 June 1970: 2163.

⁵⁸ Rev. of The Nightmare Factory, by Maxine Kumin, Virginia Quarterly Review 47.2 (Spring 1971): 60.

vigorous."⁵⁹

Published in 1972, Up Country: Poems of New England won Kumin a Pulitzer Prize in 1973.⁶⁰ As might be expected, the reviews of this, her fourth book, ranged from glowing to negative. Ralph J. Mills terms Kumin's poems: "a series of marvelously etched, intricately textured pictures of different aspects of New England life and countryside." And although he finds in Kumin's poetry similarities to Roethke, Frost, Edmund Blunden, and Jon Silken, he insists that "whatever poetic company she keeps in such poems, Mrs. Kumin is no imitator but very clearly her own writer.... Of her kind, she is quite simply an excellent poet: one who looks, who names and who makes--all with astonishing and enviable craftsmanship."⁶¹ Likewise, Joyce Carol Oates remarks that: "the experience of Up Country's 42 poems is dramatic and visionary, but above all convincing.... Up Country demonstrates beautifully how the transcendental vision is really the vision of imaginative

⁵⁹ Rev. of The Nightmare Factory, by Maxine Kumin, Booklist, 15 Oct. 1970: 165.

⁶⁰ Maxine Kumin, Up Country: Poems of New England, (New York: Harper and Row, 1972). Within the body of the dissertation--excluding the introduction--any references to this book will be included parenthetically within the text using the abbreviation UC for the title Up Country: Poems of New England.

⁶¹ Ralph J. Mills, Jr., "In The Fields of Imagination," rev. of Up Country: Poems of New England, Parnassus 1.2 (Spring/Summer 1973): 222-23.

existential life, available to anyone who seeks it."⁶²

Paul Ramsey writes less favorably of Up Country, contending that "Maxine Kumin...travels in a territory between the current genre and Robert Frost. Her poems are too frequently neat of joke or smoothly contrasted of image. Her larger statements come out more glossy than rugged."⁶³ In addition, an anonymous reviewer in The Virginia Quarterly Review writes that Kumin's poems show:

"a keen gift of observation and a pungent use of homely metaphors. If, for all these virtues, they are not wholly satisfying as poems, the reason is something too obvious and self-conscious about the pacing, something forced about the meters and rhymes: one sees the magician's hand...Perhaps one reason why there is so little good new formalist poetry is that even the staunchest defenders feel they are performing a difficult, somewhat arbitrary conjuring trick; they pride themselves on effects which a writer to whom rhyme was merely natural would consider graceless."⁶⁴

⁶² Joyce Carol Oates, Rev. of Up Country: Poems of New England, by Maxine Kumin, New York Times Book Review 19 Nov. 1972: 7.

⁶³ Paul Ramsey, "American Poetry in 1973," rev. of Up Country: Poems of New England, by Maxine Kumin, Sewanee Review LXXXII.2 (Spring 1974): 403.

⁶⁴ Rev. of Up Country: Poems of New England, by Maxine Kumin, Virginia Quarterly Review 49.3 (Summer 1973): cxi.

Ramsey's assessment of Kumin's work contradicts/ contrasts with the review of an earlier book which commented on the "unobtrusive presence of formal devices" in her poetry.⁶⁵ Though this statement concerned The Nightmare Factory, one wonders if Kumin could have changed so significantly in her next book, especially given the fact that Up Country won her a Pulitzer Prize.

Finally, with regard to Up Country, it is enlightening to note John N. Morris' reaction to the book as recorded in The Hudson Review.⁶⁶ Morris spends a considerable amount of time harping on the illustrations of the book, contending that Barbara Swan's drawings: "are unnecessary, they are positively a hindrance: prettifications, they draw too much attention to the slightly ladylike quality of a few of these poems, the air they have of essays in the female georgic." (Emphasis mine) Morris's assessment is a puzzling evaluation of both the illustrations and Kumin's poetry. One can only guess at what he means by "a slightly ladylike quality."

Critical reception of Kumin's fifth book of poetry, House, Bridge, Fountain, Gate⁶⁷ was varied as well.

⁶⁵ Rev. of The Nightmare Factory, by Maxine Kumin, Virginia Quarterly Review 47.2 (Spring 1971): 60.

⁶⁶ John N. Morris, "Making More Sense Than Omaha," rev. of Up Country: Poems of New England, by Maxine Kumin, Hudson Review 27.1 (Spring 1974): 113-14.

⁶⁷ Maxine Kumin, House Bridge, Fountain, Gate, (New York: Viking Press, 1975). Within the body of the dissertation--excluding the introduction--any further

Dabney Stuart maintains, for example, that Robert Lowell presides over the first half of the book while Anne Sexton presides over the second half. He believes that the book has merit, but he does not see Kumin as owning this merit in her own right.⁶⁸ His final cryptic comment is that "a better title for the volume might be Toad, Blackfly, Turnip, Horse, which are central among 'die Dinge' Kumin (and no one else) rescues from vanishment": because of Kumin's subject matter--her country, her nature poems--Stuart belittles the poems.⁶⁹

Martha George Meek provides a more positive assessment of the book:

The particular words of things have always been central to Kumin's poetry because they can contain raw feelings and amorphous thoughts. This is their authenticity: that they have been 'truly felt.' And from them Kumin's world takes

references to this work will be made parenthetically within the text using the abbreviation HBFG to refer to the title House, Bridge, Fountain, Gate.

⁶⁸ Joanna Russ insists in How to Suppress Women's Writing (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), that, "when a woman has written something...the first line of defense is to deny that she wrote it. Since women cannot write--Adrienne Rich insists that 'it seemed to be a given that men wrote poems and women...inhabited them'(p. 15)--someone else (a man) must have written it.... But there are subtler alternatives to the flat denial of agency.... One is 'It wrote itself.' [Or] 'Part of it wrote itself; she wrote the other part.'" (p. 16)

⁶⁹ Dabney Stuart, rev. of House, Bridge, Fountain, Gate, by Maxine Kumin, Library Journal 15 May 1975: 991.

on its clarity.⁷⁰

An even stronger evaluation of this book is in Choice:

Those who admired Kumin's confident voice, sure handling of rhythms, and close eye on the subject (amazingly so) in her Pulitzer Prize-winning collection, Up Country...will find all that here in these poems and more.... What...remains unchanged is Kumin's magic with the metaphor, a magic which literally takes one's breath away as she succeeds time after time with the perfect mixture of accuracy and surprise.⁷¹

Kumin's sixth book of poetry, The Retrieval System,⁷² was greeted with mixed critical reaction as well. Harvey Curtis Webster comments, for example, that "Kumin is almost consistently good as she diversifies her daily life into poems." However, Webster goes on to say that "neither Sexton nor Kumin nor their publishers would, I think, claim that The Retrieval System or Words for Dr. Y. is major

⁷⁰ Martha George Meek, "Authenticity of Detail," rev. of House, Bridge, Fountain, Gate, by Maxine Kumin, Prairie Schooner 50 (Spring 1976): 83.

⁷¹ Rev. of House, Bridge, Fountain, Gate, by Maxine Kumin, Choice Oct. 1975: 1001.

⁷² Maxine Kumin, The Retrieval System, (New York: Viking Press; London: Penguin, 1979). Within the body of the dissertation--excluding the introduction--any further references to this work will be made parenthetically within the text, using the abbreviation RS for the title The Retrieval System.

poetry."⁷³ In a more even-handed, yet still ambivalent review, Sybil Estess maintains that Kumin's poetry demonstrates:

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.... 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.⁷⁴ (Emphasis mine)

True to form, the reviewer in The Virginia Quarterly Review is appreciative of Kumin because:

In contrast to the many women poets writing of anger and alienation, Kumin sticks to pastoral and tribal themes--seasons, weather, gardening, horses. She remains a tough, intense, and energetic poet, more self-assured and purposeful

⁷³ Harvey Curtis Webster, "Six Poets," rev. of The Retrieval System, by Maxine Kumin, Poetry Jan. 1979: 232-33.

⁷⁴ Sybil Estess, "Past Halfway: The Retrieval System, By Maxine Kumin," rev. of The Retrieval System, by Maxine Kumin, The Iowa Review 10.4 (Fall 1979): 107-8.

than ever.⁷⁵

This critic implies that Kumin does well to avoid writing of anger and alienation: she separates herself out from the body of women poets who are strident and shrill. Notably too, the adjectives the reviewer applies to Kumin describe qualities most often ascribed to the "masculine" aspect of personality rather than the "feminine." Consequently, for this critic, Kumin's poetry would seem to have more merit because it does not seem to be written by a woman.

Robert DeMott maintains that this book "reveals the limitation of her conversational mode," and he labels her poetry "enervated and sappy." Crediting Kumin with "what must be the worst lines of the year by an established writer" ("and hid out in the foreign / bargain basements of his feelings," from "My Father's Neckties") DeMott complains that "there are too few surprises in The Retrieval System, too few places where the language is charged with immediacy, penetration and clarity."⁷⁶

The most positive evaluation of The Retrieval System is Richard Jackson's, who dubs this a "highly organized and wondrous book--a vision that balances the necessary and the incidental, the doomed lives we live against the possible miracles we witness--an exotics of mortality." In direct

⁷⁵ Rev. of The Retrieval System, by Maxine Kumin, Virginia Quarterly Review 54.4 (Autumn 1978): 144.

⁷⁶ Robert DeMott, "Recent Poetry," rev. of The Retrieval System, by Maxine Kumin, Western Humanities Review 33.2 (Spring 1979): 176.

contrast to other reviewers who have been less charitable to Kumin, Jackson perspicaciously interacts with the book, entering Kumin's philosophical, metaphysical world, delving into it on more than just a superficial basis. Jackson goes beyond a mere discussion of stylistics to come to an appreciation of the ideas inherent in the book: Jackson considers Kumin's philosophy.⁷⁷

Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief, Kumin's seventh book of poetry,⁷⁸ evoked mixed reactions. William Harmon cryptically discusses the book in his review "Kumin and Kinnell (and Kilmer)":

Too often, a Kumin poem reports its essential news and then appends a sensitive, intelligent editorial, all earnestness and sincerity. And thought: 'I think of the last day of your life' (p. 68); 'I think of what drops from us' (p. 72); 'I think of the wolf' (p. 82); 'I think of how it goes on' (p. 83).... After a while I begin talking back to such poems: 'Leave 'I think' to Joyce Kilmer. Don't think. You aren't paid to

⁷⁷ Richard Jackson, rev. of The Retrieval System, by Maxine Kumin, Concerning Poetry 11.2 (Fall 1978): 99.

⁷⁸ Maxine Kumin, Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief, (New York: Viking Press, 1982). Within the body of the dissertation--excluding the introduction--any further references to this work will be noted parenthetically within the text, using the abbreviation GT for the title Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief.

think. Be a poem, poem.'⁷⁹

It is worthwhile to note here that Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief is a book of both new and selected poems, and it is 224 pages in length. Consequently the seven examples he cites are not so overwhelming as they would be were the book 60 or 70 pages long. So while the cerebral nature of Kumin's stance and of her poetry is obvious, this type of repetition is not in every poem: the average would be about once every 30 pages or so. Harmon does concede that the book is in fact a "new and selected volume [which] shows the virtues and shortcomings of her usual style."⁸⁰

While Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief received some bad reviews, a number of critics liked the book. A reviewer in Booklist observes that "her earlier poems remind us why she might well be considered a national treasure."⁸¹ Likewise, another critic found much of value in this work:

It is a true gift to be able to distill from the disarray of daily life those breathless moments that make us recognize our fragile humanness.... Kumin speaks with a poetic voice that embraces and refines the rhythms of daily

⁷⁹ William Harmon, "Kumin and Kinnell (and Kilmer)," rev. of Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief, by Maxine Kumin, Poetry Apr. 1983: 51.

⁸⁰ Harmon, 50.

⁸¹ Rev. of Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief, by Maxine Kumin, Booklist 15 Apr. 1982: 1062.

speech....

It is the rare writer who plants images that take root in the mind of the reader. Kumin's attention to detail and evocative use of language make her just such a rarity.⁸²

And this from The Virginia Quarterly Review:

This collection...is an important document of the experience of a writer whose voice is distinctly contemporary, female (though Kumin does not burden us with feminism) and American. But Kumin's prose style is sometimes flat and uninteresting, or, as in a few instances, her excessive use of rhyme and rhythm result in pop-song-like poems. Also, a number of Kumin's newest poems lack the music and pulse existing in much of her earlier work. The most inviting and admirable aspect of this collection is the personal and autobiographical quality which ultimately draws the reader closer to the poet's heart. (Emphasis mine)⁸³

Ironically, this reviewer, who does not feel weighed down by Kumin's feminism, finds favor with her poetry because of

⁸² Rita D. Jacobs, rev. of Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief, by Maxine Kumin, World Literature Today 57.2 (Spring 1983): 289.

⁸³ Rev. of Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief, by Maxine Kumin, Virginia Quarterly Review 58.4 (Autumn 1982): 135.

the "personal and autobiographical qualit[ies]," terms often applied to women's poetry rather than men's.

Finally, Dana Gioia assesses Kumin's seventh book of poetry:

Kumin is understandably a popular poet. She is an intelligent and sensitive woman who writes on the enduring themes of life and death, place and family.... She is a strong woman whose independence is natural, not ideological, and the usual modesty of her tone does not hide her underlying self-assurance. She writes confidently about what she knows--the death of friends, the departures of her children, the landscape around her--and she does so honestly and directly without striking fashionable postures.⁸⁴

Kumin's eighth and most recent book of poetry, The Long Approach,⁸⁵ also garnered mixed reviews. Suzanne Juhasz remarks that:

In this new collection Kumin appears to be consolidating her language, and her point of

⁸⁴ Dana Gioia, "Poetry Chronicle," rev. of Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief, by Maxine Kumin, Hudson Review 35.4 (Winter 1982-83): 652.

⁸⁵ Maxine Kumin, The Long Approach, (New York: Viking Press, 1985). Within the body of the dissertation--excluding the introduction--any further references to this work will be noted parenthetically within the text, using the abbreviation LA for the title The Long Approach.

view.... However, although Kumin's heartfelt involvement with the abiding issues of human existence--what persists, what must be lost--is ever-present in these poems, as a group they lack the spark, the special-ness to make them stand out among her 'oeuvre.'⁸⁶

In this book, as Juhasz notes, there are three sections: I. "In The Family"; II. "Out There"; III "On The Farm." The first and third sections are more personal in nature, and the second section takes on the world; section II is a departure for Kumin in that she places herself within the context of a larger world, and in that she takes a political stance in a number of the poems. Significantly, Juhasz spends the most amount of time on the second section, even commenting that she "particularly like[s] the title poem, as it reveals the need to get from 'out there' home again."⁸⁷ Juhasz seems to be more appreciative of the poetry which represents the poet in the world longing to return home; perhaps it is that the emotion in those poems seems to be closer to the surface, and therefore, more appealing to Juhasz. Interestingly, Juhasz finds most favor with the section that places the poet in the context of a larger world; some traditional, male critics find most favor with this section as well, because women's poetry is

⁸⁶ Suzanne Juhasz, rev. of The Long Approach, by Maxine Kumin, Library Journal 15 Nov. 1985: 100.

⁸⁷ Juhasz, rev. of The Long Approach, 100.

often thought to be too personal, too limited in its scope and its world. In contrast, Section II places the poet within a larger context. Ostriker recalls that Theodore Roethke termed Louise Bogan "an exception to the run of women poets, 'whose typical deficiencies included a set of 'esthetic and moral shortcomings'":

the spinning out; the embroidering of trivial themes; a concern with the mere surfaces of life--that special province of the feminine talent in prose--hiding from the real agonies of the spirit; refusing to face up to what existence is; lyric or religious posturing; running between the boudoir and the altar; stamping a tiny foot against God or lapsing into a sententiousness that implies the author has reinvented integrity; carrying on excessively against Fate, about time; lamenting the lot of the woman; caterwauling; writing the same poem about fifty times, and so on.⁸⁸

Conversely, Peter Stitt finds the second section the weakest:

It is in [the second section] that the poet travels furthest from home in order to consider, from a moral perspective, 'our troubled and unbalanced world....' In contrast to other parts

⁸⁸ Quoted in Ostriker, Stealing the Language..., 2.

of the volume, the writing here tends to be limp, discursive, and literal.... Maxine Kumin's best writing is still that in the most domestic vein, as she proves so beautifully elsewhere in The Long Approach....⁸⁹

Robert B. Shaw echoes these sentiments about the second section: Kumin writes as well as ever in her customary modes. There are a number of poems, though, in this new book which are for her something of a departure. In these, her publishers tell us, she 'boldly ventures into public terrain.' The results in such cases are not as laudable as the public-spirited impulse behind them. Kumin is certainly not unique in producing poems on public themes which seem inadequate to their occasions.⁹⁰

Clearly, critical reaction to Kumin's poetry has been varied, one critic liking what another found lacking. Kumin is often caught between factions, the formalists lauding her, and some traditional male critics appreciating the reserved nature of her poetry, while disapproving of anything sounding as if it were written by a woman. Many

⁸⁹ Peter Stitt, "Staying at Home and Going Away," rev. of The Long Approach, by Maxine Kumin, Georgia Review XL.2 (Summer 1986): 559.

⁹⁰ Robert B. Shaw, rev. of The Long Approach, by Maxine Kumin, Poetry Apr. 1986: 37-38.

critics spend an inordinate amount of time discussing surface structure--such as rhyme and rhythm--while never considering the deep structure of her poetry. Some critics simply do not take Kumin seriously, an all too common fate for female poets. Kumin's poetry is, after all--as shall later be discussed--a poetry of ideas, of philosophy, not mere sleight-of-hand. It would be difficult to imagine male poets such as Pound, Eliot, Ashberry, Olson, or Creeley being considered on the basis of their stylistics to the exclusion of their ideas. It is indeed impossible to imagine a critic lauding a male poet because he does not write like a man: in essence because he seems to be denying his gender. This type of commentary is also inappropriate for women; the value of their poetry should not be directly related to their ability to deny their selfhood.

Critical reception of Kumin's novels has been varied as well. Through Dooms of Love,⁹¹ Kumin's first novel (published in 1965), was described by a Booklist reviewer as "a quiet story of family love, tensions, inner distances, and unbreakable bonds, conveyed in a reasonably well-managed melange of flashbacks, onflowing dialogue, and

⁹¹ Maxine Kumin, Through Dooms of Love, (New York: Harper and Row, 1965); as A Daughter And Her Loves, (London: Gollanez, 1965).

rather mannered flights of stream of consciousness."⁹² Phoebe Adams describes this book as having prose that is "sharp and direct." There are, for Adams, however, serious flaws in this novel: "That the book is obviously true but never truly moving is the author's own choice; she has elected to avoid all excess, and has succeeded a trifle too well."⁹³ Likewise, another critic, finds both favor and fault with this first novel:

Mrs. Kumin has treated her brief plot...with originality, and a masterly, poetic, and utterly real creation of time and place. But this strength of the book is also its weakness. Every sensation is described in such meticulous detail, every episode given such immediate attention, that the emphasis of the story is lost.⁹⁴

Published in 1968, The Passions of Uxport, Kumin's second novel, was described as "literate, compassionate, and absorbing.... If Kumin has any fault at all as a writer, it is perhaps that she is at times almost too knowledgeable, too sure of herself--but this is a small

⁹² Rev. of Through Dooms of Love, by Maxine Kumin, Booklist 1 May 1965: 860.

⁹³ Phoebe Adams, "Potpourri," rev. of Through Dooms of Love, by Maxine Kumin, Atlantic Monthly May 1965: 154.

⁹⁴ Riva T. Bresler, rev. of Through Dooms of Love, by Maxine Kumin, Library Journal 1 Apr. 1965: 1744.

fault in an excellent, timely book."⁹⁵ More negative is J. Mitchell Morse's summation of the book's lacking "any literary interest," although it does have "a certain sociological interest as popular entertainment for people who can read literate prose easy enough to enjoy it."⁹⁶

The review in Booklist is less damning, but still mildly negative: "Suburban people are handled with depth and subtlety of characterization, but a symbolic narrative framework is somewhat heavy-handed."⁹⁷ David J. Gordon submits that this is "an engrossing second novel...often a wise and satisfying book...[Kumin's] powers of observation, interpretation, and phrasing are as strong as Updike's...and less marred by moral perversity, excessive symbolism, and fine writing."⁹⁸

Kumin's third novel, The Abduction, published in 1971,⁹⁹ received more uniformly positive reviews. One reviewer terms the novel: "intensely realistic, peopled with sharply drawn, believable blacks and whites grappling

⁹⁵ Rev. of The Passions of Uxport, by Maxine Kumin, Choice Feb. 1969: 1582.

⁹⁶ J. Mitchell Morse, "Masters and Innocents," rev. of The Passions of Uxport, by Maxine Kumin, Hudson Review 21.3 (Autumn 1968): 537-38.

⁹⁷ Rev. of The Passions of Uxport, by Maxine Kumin, Booklist 15 June 1968: 1175.

⁹⁸ David J. Gordon, "Some Recent Novels: Styles of Martyrdom," rev. of The Passions of Uxport, by Maxine Kumin, Yale Review LVIII.1 (Autumn 1968): 119-121.

⁹⁹ Maxine Kumin, The Abduction, (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

at the grassroots with the problems of racism."¹⁰⁰ Another critic notes that "the author provides lively narrative and some very funny scenes,"¹⁰¹ while the reviewer in Publishers Weekly comments that "the author writes beautifully and meaningfully, creating a group of very real characters."¹⁰² The critic in Booklist purports that: "deft, compact, discerning characterization and interaction of people who are warmly and believably human in their strengths and vulnerability compensate for the author's driven determination to be multiply topical."¹⁰³ And finally, this from Paul Theroux:

The voices are perfect, the effects of things-at-an-end, causing anger in one person, confusion or stupor in others are rendered with great skill. That the prose is just a tiny bit too poetical is a less serious fault than Mrs. Kumin's attempts to thicken the narrative by allowing so many characters a voice and viewpoint, at the expense of the brave and credible woman, who when she stands apart from the story, the story almost

¹⁰⁰ Shirley A. Smith, rev. of The Abduction, by Maxine Kumin, Library Journal 1 Nov. 1971: 3639.

¹⁰¹ Phoebe Adams, "Short Reviews of Books," rev. of The Abduction, by Maxine Kumin, Atlantic Monthly Oct. 1971: 135.

¹⁰² Rev. of The Abduction, by Maxine Kumin, Publishers Weekly 12 July 1971: 65.

¹⁰³ Rev. of The Abduction, by Maxine Kumin, Booklist 15 Nov. 1971: 273.

ceases to matter, and all the brilliance dims.¹⁰⁴

Kumin's most recent novel, The Designated Heir, published in 1974,¹⁰⁵ received rave reviews from the New York Times Book Review critic Jane Howard:

Wonderment, in these numb and wary times, is a rare response to fiction or to anything else, and Mrs. Kumin's fourth novel, The Designated Heir, evokes it over and over.... In both verse and prose she brings tastes, sounds, textures, smells and the look of things to vivid life.... It is not a novel of much action or wide scope, but its texture is a marvel and its people are so vivid they take up permanent residence in our minds.¹⁰⁶

Dabney Stuart argues that this is "a convincing book, built with Kumin's familiar warmth and skill,"¹⁰⁷ while Pearl K. Bell insists that the book was written with "graceful intelligence and resilience,"¹⁰⁸ and another reviewer remarks that: "Ms. Kumin is a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet.

¹⁰⁴ Paul Theroux, rev. of The Abduction, by Maxine Kumin, Book World 10 Oct. 1971: 12.

¹⁰⁵ Maxine Kumin, The Designated Heir, (New York: Viking Press, 1974).

¹⁰⁶ Jane Howard, rev. of The Designated Heir, by Maxine Kumin, New York Times Book Review 23 June 1974: 10.

¹⁰⁷ Dabney Stuart, rev. of The Designated Heir, by Maxine Kumin, Library Journal 15 May 1974: 1408.

¹⁰⁸ Pearl K. Bell, "Women on Women," rev. of The Designated Heir, by Maxine Kumin, New Leader 9 Dec. 1974: 4.

Had one not known, one might have guessed."¹⁰⁹2

In contrast to these resoundingly favorable assessments, William McPherson sardonically attacks both Kumin and her novel, first comparing this novel and its author to Love Story and Erich Segal, and then moving on to dissect her stylistics:

She has an unerring eye for the inept simile....
She also likes to pass on aphoristic wisdom, better when it comes by way of Thoreau, whom she quotes frequently, than from the author. The Designated Heir is a marshmallow of a book-- sticky, sweet, and soft in the center, and suitable for roasting.¹¹⁰

In addition to four novels, Kumin has published a collection of short fiction entitled Why Can't We Live Together Like Civilized Human Beings?, 1982. Rita D. Jacobs asserts that Kumin "mingles the eye of the poet with the structures of the true tale-spinner, [drawing] the reader...deftly and surely to the lives of these characters."¹¹¹ The reviewer in Publishers Weekly calls these stories "marvelous, seemingly casual explorations of

¹⁰⁹ Rev. of The Designated Heir, by Maxine Kumin, Publishers Weekly 22 Apr. 1974: 72.

¹¹⁰ William McPherson, rev. of The Designated Heir, by Maxine Kumin, New Republic 10&17 Aug. 1974: 25-26.

¹¹¹ Rita D. Jacobs, rev. of Why Can't We Live Together Like Civilized Human Beings?, by Maxine Kumin, World Literature Today 57.2 (Spring 1983): 289.

the question posed by the title story.... Kumin's tales are beautifully conceived and realized, this collection one to revisit again and again.¹¹² Kirkus Reviews evaluated these short stories as: "a quiet, half-successful collection [which is] sometimes annoyingly unformed and pointless but often impressive in its idiosyncratic, solid intelligence."¹¹³ And finally, Bonnie Lyons observed:

Despite their brevity, the best stories have a satisfying largeness of scope in addition to speed and economy.... Kumin does two things exceedingly well: she succeeds in creating complex characters with the 'mixed elements' 'paper people' never exhibit and in making these women and their complicated lives seem remarkably vital and valuable--for their very middleness.¹¹⁴

Kumin's first book of essays, To Make A Prairie, was published in 1979.¹¹⁵ David Kirby comments that "what

¹¹² Rev. of Why Can't We Live Together Like Civilized Human Beings?, by Maxine Kumin, Publishers Weekly 9 Apr. 1982: 44.

¹¹³ Rev. of Why Can't We Live Together Like Civilized Human Beings?, by Maxine Kumin, Kirkus Reviews 1 Mar. 1982: 295

¹¹⁴ Bonnie Lyons, rev. of Why Can't We Live Together Like Civilized Human Beings?, by Maxine Kumin, Studies in Short Fiction 19.4 (Fall 1982): 391.

¹¹⁵ Maxine Kumin, To Make A Prairie, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1979).

[Kumin] has to say is very fine indeed, though...the more depersonalized the comment, the better. An essay on poetic closure, 'Closing the Door,' is alone worth the price of the book."¹¹⁶ If Kirby finds any fault with the book it is that the "Country Living" essays were included; but he admits that this is "a small point to quibble over."¹¹⁷ Robert McDowell agrees that there is much of value in this book:

Her essays on Frost and Larkin are durable; when she writes about her own process she is as thorough and enlightening as any self-critical poet can be. But her "Three Lectures on Poetry" is the most memorable section here. In these pieces she examines closure and intention in poems as well as what she calls the four kinds of "I." This last subject is intriguing, though I still don't quite know what to make of her "ideational I" and her distinction between the "lyrical" and "autobiographical I." My own dull-wittedness aside, this is a valuable piece for anyone who frets about the show the first person

¹¹⁶ David Kirby, "Hulking and Nebulous Immensities," rev. of To Make A Prairie, by Maxine Kumin, Southern Review July 1981: 665.

¹¹⁷ Kirby, 666.

has been making in poem after poem.¹¹⁸

Likewise, the reviewer in Publishers Weekly found favor with the book, calling it a "certain treasure for several special audiences.... each essay is a gem in its own right, and the collection should do much to enhance the already sterling reputation of this Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and novelist."¹¹⁹ Kumin's second book of essays, In Deep: Country Essays,¹²⁰ was published in June 1987; consequently, reviews of it will not be included here.

Kumin also wrote a number of children's books--22 to date--most alone, some with Anne Sexton. In my interview with her, Kumin denied any connection between her children's books and her fiction or poetry. Nevertheless I think it helpful to provide an overview of their reception. As might be expected, reviews of these books were also mixed. Dorothy Garey, for example, in a review of Sebastian and the Dragon,¹²¹ (Kumin's first children's book) complained that the book was written in "mediocre verse and illustrated in exaggerated cartoon style

¹¹⁸ Robert McDowell, "The Mum Generation Was Always Talking," rev. of To Make a Prairie, by Maxine Kumin, Hudson Review 38.3 (Autumn 1985): 512.

¹¹⁹ Rev. of To Make a Prairie, by Maxine Kumin, Publishers Weekly 3 Sept. 1979): 94.

¹²⁰ Maxine Kumin, In Deep: Country Essays, (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987).

¹²¹ Maxine Kumin, Sebastian and the Dragon, (New York: Putnam, 1960).

humor."¹²² Saturday Review remarked that Spring Things¹²³ consists of "gentle verse and soft pictures."¹²⁴ Booklist favorably reviewed The Beach Before Breakfast¹²⁵: "While this is a mood piece, its person-to-person approach, its well-conveyed sense of joy in exploration and discovery, its seashore lore, and its satisfying surprise ending should entice and hold the interest of many children."¹²⁶ Eloise Rue insisted that the text [of The Beach Before Breakfast] is rather stilted in comparison to the exciting pictures."¹²⁷ Faraway Farm¹²⁸ was evaluated as a "lovely book"¹²⁹ and a "pleasantly instructive tale."¹³⁰ The

¹²² Dorothy Garey, rev. of Sebastian and the Dragon, by Maxine Kumin, Library Journal 15 Mar. 1960: 1299.

¹²³ Maxine Kumin, Spring Things, (New York: Putnam, 1961).

¹²⁴ Rev. of Spring Things, by Maxine Kumin, Saturday Review 13 May 1961: 46.

¹²⁵ Maxine Kumin, The Beach Before Breakfast, (New York: Putnam, 1964).

¹²⁶ Rev. of The Beach Before Breakfast, by Maxine Kumin, Booklist 1 Sept. 1964: 50.

¹²⁷ Eloise Rue, rev. of The Beach Before Breakfast, by Maxine Kumin, Library Journal 15 Sept. 1964: 3460.

¹²⁸ Maxine Kumin, Faraway Farm, (New York: Putnam, 1967).

¹²⁹ Rev. of Faraway Farm, by Maxine Kumin, Publishers Weekly 18 Sept. 1967: 67.

¹³⁰ Mary R. Sive, rev. of Faraway Farm, by Maxine Kumin, Library Journal 15 Dec. 1967: 4604.

Wonderful Babies of 1809 (and Other Years)¹³¹ did not fare as well: "An unattractive hodgepodge of doggerel verse and cartoon-like line drawings."¹³² When Grandmother Was Young,¹³³ was described as a book whose "text is self-consciously instructive and far too detailed and involved to appeal to the book's intended audience."¹³⁴ Joey and the Birthday Present¹³⁵ was better received; Sarah F. Curtis called this book an "appealing, sensitively told story of friendship,"¹³⁶ while Judith Rosenfeld noted: "A warm and appealing interpretation of the friendship between a country mouse (Joey) and a city mouse (Prince, the Birthday Present) this modern version has humor, excitement and great interest."¹³⁷

¹³¹ Maxine Kumin, The Wonderful Babies of 1809 (and Other Years), (New York: Putnam, 1968).

¹³² Harriet B. Quimby, rev. of The Wonderful Babies of 1809 (and Other Years), by Maxine Kumin, Library Journal 15 Oct. 1968: 3971.

¹³³ Maxine Kumin, When Grandmother Was Young, (New York: Putnam, 1969).

¹³⁴ Lina Daukas, rev. of When Grandmother Was Young, by Maxine Kumin, Library Journal 15 Sept. 1969: 3206.

¹³⁵ Maxine Kumin and Anne Sexton, Joey and the Birthday Present, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1971).

¹³⁶ Sarah F. Curtis, rev. of Joey and the Birthday Present, by Maxine Kumin and Anne Sexton, School Library Journal Oct. 1971: 104.

¹³⁷ Judith B. Rosenfeld, rev. of Joey and the Birthday Present, by Maxine Kumin and Anne Sexton, Childhood Education Nov. 1971: 100.

The Wizard's Tears¹³⁸ was described as a "winning story with exceptional illustrations"¹³⁹ whose "matter-of-fact telling makes the magic thoroughly credible and lots of fun."¹⁴⁰ The reviewer in Publishers Weekly noted that What Color Is Caesar?¹⁴¹ shows "the quality that won poet Maxine Kumin a Pulitzer Prize."¹⁴² The critic in Booklist commented that: "The dialogue is clever--some will say too clever, some funny--and the common theme...developed with an original twist."¹⁴³ And finally, Kumin's most recent children's book, The Microscope, published in 1984,¹⁴⁴ received a number of very favorable reviews as well as one quite negative one. Holly Sanhuber insisted that: "Kumin's dull and sing-songy verse is facile and banal, and should have been left where it first appeared, in The Wonderful Babies of 1809..... There is a fundamental lack of

¹³⁸ Maxine Kumin and Anne Sexton, The Wizard's Tears, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1975).

¹³⁹ Merrie Lou Cohen, rev. of The Wizard's Tears, by Maxine Kumin and Anne Sexton, School Library Journal Nov. 1975: 64.

¹⁴⁰ Rev. of The Wizard's Tears, by Maxine Kumin and Anne Sexton, Publishers Weekly 15 Sept. 1975: 60.

¹⁴¹ Maxine Kumin, What Color Is Caesar?, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1978).

¹⁴² Rev. of What Color Is Caesar?, by Maxine Kumin, Publishers Weekly 17 Apr. 1978: 76.

¹⁴³ Rev. of What Color Is Caesar?, by Maxine Kumin, Booklist 15 May 1978: 1495.

¹⁴⁴ Maxine Kumin, The Microscope, (New York: Harper and Row, 1984).

agreement between format, subject matter and intended audience."¹⁴⁵ The other reviews, however, were far more positive, such as the assessment in Parents' Magazine which lauded Kumin's "clever, light-hearted verse,"¹⁴⁶ and the one in Publishers Weekly which maintained that "Kumin...writes engagingly."¹⁴⁷ Horn Book Magazine is equally positive as it notes: "The varying sizes of the neatly framed pictures and the pleasing clarity of the uncluttered text contribute to the attractiveness of a beautifully planned book."¹⁴⁸

III. Placing Maxine Kumin's poetry within a context is not an easy task. In some ways, for example, Kumin might be considered a confessional poet: her poetry is sometimes quite personal. Comments by M.L. Rosenthal about Robert Lowell's poetry might be applied to Kumin as well: "In a larger, more impersonal context, these poems seemed to me

¹⁴⁵ Holly Sanhuber, rev. of The Microscope, by Maxine Kumin, School Library Journal Oct. 1984: 149.

¹⁴⁶ Alice Siegel, "And To All A Good Book...", rev. of The Microscope, by Maxine Kumin, Parents' Magazine Nov. 1984: 53.

¹⁴⁷ Rev. of The Microscope, by Maxine Kumin, Publishers Weekly 7 Sept. 1984: 78.

¹⁴⁸ E.R.T., rev. of The Microscope, by Maxine Kumin, Horn Book Magazine LXI.1 (Jan./Feb. 1985): 64.

one culmination of the Romantic and modern tendency to place the literal Self more and more at the center of the poem."¹⁴⁹ Often in Kumin's poetry, one finds the literal self in the poem; there does not appear to be a barrier between the poet and the material of the poem. Indeed, Kumin herself, in an essay entitled "Four Kinds of 'I,'" notes that the fourth kind of "I" with which a poet writes is manifested in a poem which:

is the autobiographical poem, for which an ancient and honorable tradition exists. It is an attractive poetry, capable of sustaining a good deal of passion.... Autobiography is just that, whether it takes the form of poetry or of prose, and it embraces any reminiscence that is particular to the poet. Confessional poems, I think, simply take the process one step further. They are more deeply personal revelations about the poet's psychological struggles, laying him open to censure or sympathy, and can range freely among an investigation of his marital problems, struggle for sanity, sexual identity, losses or occasional triumphs, but more commonly

¹⁴⁹ M.L. Rosenthal, The New Poets, American and British Poets Since World War II, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967): 27.

catastrophes.¹⁵⁰

While Kumin often places herself at the center of her poems, constructing no barrier between the poet and the speaker in the poem, and while she is also autobiographical as a rule, she does not hold to the precept that a confessional poet must be making personal revelations which are extremely intimate and often shocking.¹⁵¹ Rosenthal

¹⁵⁰ Maxine Kumin, "Four Kinds of 'I,'" in To Make A Prairie, ed. Maxine Kumin (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1979): 153.

¹⁵¹ Sandra M. Gilbert, in her "'My Name is Darkness': The poetry of Self-Definition" (Contemporary Literature 18.4 (Autumn 1977): 443-457) suggests that "the self-defining confessional genre, with its persistent assertions of identity and its emphasis on a central mythology of the self, may be (at least for our own time) a distinctively female poetic mode.... 'Confessional' poetry has, of course, been generally associated with a number of contemporary male poets, most notably Berryman, Lowell, and Snodgrass. A tradition of such writing, moreover, can easily be traced back through such male mythologists of the self as Whitman and Yeats to Wordsworth and Byron, those romantic patriarchs whose self-examinations and self-dramatizations probably fathered not only the poetry of what Keats called the egotistical sublime but also the more recent ironic mode we might call the egotistical ridiculous. Most male poets, however, have been able to move beyond the self-deprecations and self-assertions of confessional writing to larger, more objectively formulated appraisals of God, humanity, society.... they manage to be 'at once private and public, lyrical and rhetorical'...because the personal crisis of the male poet 'is felt at the same time as a symbolic embodiment of national and cultural crisis.... The male confessional poet...even while romantically exploring his own psyche, observes himself as a representative specimen with a sort of scientific exactitude. Alienated, he's nevertheless an ironic sociologist of his own alienation because he considers his analytic perspective on himself a civilized, normative point of view.... Like other modern male poetes maudits, in short, he has a cool faith in his own ability to classify his own exemplary sufferings, a curious, calm confidence that even in madness he is in some sense at the

coined the term "confessional poetry," "because of the way Lowell brought his private humiliations, sufferings, and psychological problems into the poems of Life Studies."¹⁵² He terms confessional poetry a poetry of suffering which is, at times, unbearable because the poetry frequently portrays a mentally disturbed or unbalanced state. While certainly not all confessional poets evince such a state, "a heightened sensitivity to the human predicament in general...has led to a sharper sense, as a by-product of the pain of existence under even 'normal' conditions."¹⁵³

While many of Kumin's poems exhibit an autobiographical tendency, two of the qualities of her poetry in general are restraint and control, so that although many of her poems show deep pain--especially in

intellectual center of things. Can it be (at least in part) that because he's a man, he can readily picture himself as Everyman? Certainly, by contrast, the female confessional poet seems to feel no such paradoxical ease with her own anxieties....The detached irony of a Lowell or a Berryman--the irony possible for a self-assured, normative sensibility--is totally unavailable to her, unavailable because even at her most objective she feels eccentric, not representative; peripheral, not central.... To define her suffering would be to define her identity, and such self-definition is her goal, rather than her starting point.... Striving for self-knowledge, she experiments with different propositions about her own nature, never cool or comfortable enough to be (like her male counterparts) an ironic sociologist; always, instead, a desperate Galileo, a passionate empiricist who sees herself founding a new science rather than extending the techniques and discoveries of an old one." (pp. 445-6)

¹⁵² Rosenthal, 26.

¹⁵³ Rosenthal, 130.

her struggle to come to terms with loss--much of this feeling is controlled by the distance which the poet places between herself and the poem.¹⁵⁴ The subjects of the poems include those that cause great pain--deaths, alienation, etc.--and, consequently, which are very personal.¹⁵⁵ The difference, one supposes, is that Kumin the poet is reflective of Kumin the woman in that both cope well with loss. Kumin is a sane poet; she is a life-affirming poet. The revelations and confessions of her poetry are the

¹⁵⁴ Similarly, Adrienne Rich's earlier poetry in particular showed this kind of distance between poet and subject, for which both Rich and Kumin have been lauded. W.H. Auden "complimented the 'younger poet' somewhat condescendingly for not seeking novelty and instead cultivating the 'detachment from the self and its emotions' which makes for craftsmanship, as Eliot had observed. Thus the echoes of Frost, Yeats, Stevens, Robinson, Emily Dickinson and Auden himself in these first poems indicated her intelligence and discretion. Auden sums up the virtues of the poems with the statement that they 'are neatly and modestly dressed, speak quietly but do not mumble, respect their elders but are not cowed by them, and do not tell fibs.' In other words, the stereotype--prim, fussy, and schoolmarmish--that has corseted and strait-laced women-poets into 'poetesses' whom men could deprecate with admiration" (Albert Gelpi, "Adrienne Rich: The Poetics of Change," in American Poetry Since 1960--Some Critical Perspectives (Chester Springs, Pennsylvania: Dufour Editions, 1974): 123.

¹⁵⁵ Sandra Gilbert suggests that the woman poet "struggles to name her two selves, one perceived as public, rational, social--the identities the external world assigns to a woman; the second self is felt as subversive, private even antisocial, devoted to irrational creative passions and guilty about it--an identity she may dare acknowledge even to herself." (Quoted in Susan R. Van Dyne, "Double Monologues: Voices in American Women's Poetry," Massachusetts Review 23.3 (Autumn 1982): 463.

product of an "unhaunted mind."¹⁵⁶ Therefore, while Kumin's poems are personal--thereby in one way qualifying her as a confessional poet--they are not poems that focus on the "pain of existence," but rather they focus on the ordering and the transforming of that pain. Therefore, Kumin does not fit very neatly into the category of confessional poets; for the majority of Kumin's poems divulge a poet who is seeking to make sense of, to order loss, rather than a poet who is overwhelmed by her life. Actively engaged in her spiritual quest, Kumin acts upon her losses rather than accepting them as victim.

Much of Kumin's poetry is, in fact, overwhelmingly personal. Her work is peopled by her husband, her children, her parents, her brother, her best friend. Her poems reflect the poet's relationships with these people, her emphasis on the importance of the tribe (a combination of both family and close friends), and her struggle to come to terms with loss as she contemplates the eventuality of death for herself and for her husband, as her children grow up and move away, and as her parents, her brother, and her best friend all die. That Kumin's poetry is largely personal is something which she would seem to have in common with other women writers. For women writers are frequently attacked for writing about the personal, about a restricted world, rather than about the "universal." The

¹⁵⁶ James Dickey, 636.

largely-male critical establishment finds that, in particular, this personal quality of women's poetry makes it inherently less valuable:

Some of the recurring stereotypes [scholars] have identified are that women typically exhibit excessive reliance on autobiography, have the habit of focusing on trivial subject matter, and operate from intuitive rather than analytic sensibility. Such scholars have in fact argued that the characteristic reluctance of so many earlier critics to speak of women writers without reference to their sex is to be attributed not to the perception that women might create a separate, different, and equally significant literature, but rather to the conviction that their writings are inherently less important than men's.¹⁵⁷

The judgements discussed in this passage are revealed in the term "excessive reliance." The traditionally-male critical establishment has deemed that one must place oneself in a "universal" context to write valuable poems, and that, furthermore, it is only women who write personally. As Deborah Pope observes:

¹⁵⁷ Winifred Farrant Bevilacqua, "Introduction," in Fiction by American Women: Recent Views, ed. Winifred Farrant Bevilacqua, (Port Washington, New York: Associated Faculty Press, 1983): 4.

Every woman writer has had to deal with the realization that men write out of experience that is 'universal' but that her experience is likely to be regarded as trivial and private. If the highest praise is the proverbial accolade 'she writes like a man,' it becomes necessary for a woman to overcome her sex to write. A man has only to express his.¹⁵⁸

But it is not so easy to categorize Kumin as writing like a woman, for "the womb doesn't hold a pen any more than the scrotum does."¹⁵⁹ While a large number of her poems is personal, and while she does not attempt to hide her femaleness within her poetry, she exhibits other qualities in her poetry that have been traditionally evaluated as "masculine" qualities. In an essay on Sylvia Plath, Joyce Carol Oates observes that a "traditionally masculine [ego is] activated by the desire to name and to place and to conquer."¹⁶⁰ Feminist interpretation of the importance of naming dictates that women must reclaim this power. Ostriker maintains that:

¹⁵⁸ Deborah Pope, A Separate Vision, Isolation in Contemporary Women's Poetry, (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 3.

¹⁵⁹ Ellen Peck Killoh, "The Woman Writer and the Element of Destruction," College English Oct. 1972: 36.

¹⁶⁰ Joyce Carol Oates, "On Sylvia Plath," in Contemporary Poetry in America, ed. Robert Boyers, (New York: Schocken Books, 1974): 147.

At the core of the women's poetry movement is the quest for autonomous self-definition. Shaping that quest is a heritage, external and internal, which opposes female autonomy. 'If we don't name ourselves we are nothing,' says Audre Lorde. 'If the world defines you it will define you to your disadvantage.'¹⁶¹

While Kumin does not seek to conquer through her poetry (except perhaps the overwhelming sense of loss which she feels, especially in her early poetry), she does seek to name and to place:¹⁶² the title of House, Bridge, Fountain, Gate shows the poet's desire to name, to particularize, to set down as carefully and distinctly as possible the details of her world; also, Kumin seeks to place, in that she searches for and finds order through poetry.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Ostriker, Stealing the Language..., 59.

¹⁶² Kumin speaks of the importance of naming in her "The Premonitory Shiver," (CEA Critic 47.3 (Spring 1985): 26-36): "This [Rilke's] exhortation to the poet to name things--to say out their particularities as clearly as possible--seems to me to go to the heart of our 'craft or sullen art.' The poet's mission is to be authentic and specific, first of all, to evoke with an intensity that poetry, above all language by reason of its selection and comprehension, can evoke, the color the clutch and hang, the shape of an event, an object, an emotion, a relationship." (p. 27) Although men have been traditionally empowered with naming--beginning with Adam--women seek to rename the world using their own terminology.

¹⁶³ Mary Daly insists women must reclaim this power of naming which men have usurped: "women have had the power of naming stolen from [them]. [They] have not been free to use [their] own power to name [themselves], the world, or God. The old naming was not the product of dialogue--a fact

Therefore, with these traits as well as with other so-called "masculine" traits--such as distance, details, and intellectualization--and with the personal nature of Kumin's poetry--her presence as a woman in her poems, especially the later work (as she becomes more "politicized"), the subject matter particular to her because she is a woman, her concern with the particular rather than with the universal--Kumin remains a poet who is difficult to categorize. For she is not a vociferous feminist in her work, though that is not to say that she is an anti-feminist; it is to say that while it is obvious in Kumin's later poetry especially that she is a woman, she does not overtly seek to advance a particular ideology through her poetry. Consequently, her poetry does not fit simply within a canon of feminist women's poetry. I believe that it is for this reason that certain feminist critics lambaste Kumin: her early work, in particular, is not political enough for them. In some ways, Kumin writes out of the male tradition. But then, how is it possible to completely avoid writing from the male tradition given that Western culture--which gives women a sense of themselves in

inadvertently admitted in the Genesis myth in which Adam names the animals and the woman. Women are now realizing that this imposing of words was false because partial. That is, partial and inadequate words have been taken as adequate" (p. 130). Kumin's emphasis on the naming of things is consequently quite significant; although her early work shows her to be writing out of a male tradition, her insistence on empowering herself foreshadows her movement to a more consciously-female stance.

the world--is patriarchal?¹⁶⁴ Margaret Dickie observes that Elaine Showalter:

draws on the model of the cultural anthropologists Shirley and Edwin Ardener, who claim that women constitute a muted group, the boundaries of whose culture and reality partly overlap but are not really contained by the dominant (male) group. In this scheme, 'muted' suggests problems of language and of power: the dominant group controls the forms in which consciousness can be articulated, and the muted group must mediate its beliefs through these forms.... Despite Bakhtin's belief in the unity of poetic language, women's poetry is double-voiced discourse because, like the novel, it has emerged from some of the lower forms of discourse--extraliterary forms like the diary, the letter, for example, or even the nursery rhyme, which women employ effectively--and it remains responsive to these forms within

¹⁶⁴ See Juhasz's discussion of Marianne Moore in Naked and Fiery Forms (pp. 33-56). It is helpful to understand the tradition of which Moore was a part, and from which Kumin began to escape in her later poetry. Juhasz observes that: "During the first half of the twentieth century women poets were trying to get into the tradition, not to start their own." (p. 35) "The formal discipline and precision of her [Moore's] work called forth critical studies focused on verbal techniques: on structure and style." (p. 37) Similarly, many reviews of Kumin's work focussed on like elements of her poetry.

conventions that have been formalized by a largely male-dominated tradition.¹⁶⁵

Interestingly, however, Kumin has been relatively well-accepted into the canon of contemporary American poetry. There are a number of reasons which one might suggest for Kumin's relative acceptance. First, if women are attacked for being too 'subjective' or 'confessional' as well as intensely self-preoccupied, excessively enthusiastic, overly emotional, lacking in coolness, objectivity, and control, Kumin is a controlled, measured poet.¹⁶⁶ Also, she has largely been a formalist although she writes in free verse as well. Kumin herself has noted that the use of form helps her to stay in control in the poem and to work with difficult material that would otherwise overwhelm her:

I generally choose something complex and difficult. 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

¹⁶⁵ Margaret Dickie, "The Alien in Contemporary American Women's Poetry," Contemporary Literature 28.3 (1987): pp. 301-2.

¹⁶⁶ Koolish, 55.

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.¹⁶⁷

The use of form, obviously, allows the poet a control--as does the implementation of rhyme--which she does not otherwise feel, and in this way, the form frees the poet.¹⁶⁸ A formalist such as Kumin, who obviously seeks to write at times in standard forms--sonnets, sestinas, etc.--is likely to be better accepted by the critical establishment. Also, the sense of an intellect in control, rather than emotions that are out-of-control, is appealing to those who appreciate poetry written from the perspective of traditional canonical poetry. Consequently, Kumin's sense of control--in part manifested through her use of rhyme, form, and restraint--makes her a less-threatening poet to a literary establishment that appreciates poetry that does not seem too "female."

Critical comments on Kumin's work affirm my

¹⁶⁷ Meek, 19.

¹⁶⁸ "Judith Johnson Sherwin explains that 'what rhyme allows you to do is to subtract your shaping ego from the poem and open yourself up to what God or the Muse or the life-force gives you in the shape of chance.' Each of these three forms [rhymed, ballad, and sestina] restrict the poet's possible word choices. Yet this limitation can also suggest to the poet new contextual meanings for those words which happen to fall within the given rhyme or repetition. Thus the poet expands the meanings of individual words by making new conceptual frameworks for them. This of course has always been an important reason for the use of those forms, in addition to the musical quality which they add." (Koolish, 29.)

contention. The reviews of Halfway laud the fact that the poems "are feminine only because they are extraordinarily personal."¹⁶⁹ Dabney Stuart congratulates Kumin for her control in The Privilege: "I want to quote a few passages to illustrate, finally, the kind of formal control Mrs. Kumin exercises upon these raw materials, emphasizing rather than destroying their force. One learns the power of a stallion more by trying to guide him than by letting him run free."¹⁷⁰ A review of The Nightmare Factory is also favorable, commenting that Kumin writes "without making the reader uncomfortable by the willing surrender of privacy."¹⁷¹ Implicit in this judgement is the absolute relief that Kumin does not write like a woman; instead she exercises control and restraint in her work--admirable masculine qualities. Kumin/Kumin's poetry is aligned with a stallion: a virile male horse, rather than a eunuch gelding, or even a mare. Rather phallogentric criticism. Also, one surmises that the critic appreciates Kumin because she knows how to behave. In what is meant to be a sympathetic treatment of women's poetry, in general, James Finn Cotter castigates the critical establishment: aloof, academic and male--[which] never took these feminine

¹⁶⁹ Rev. of Halfway, Saturday Review, 30.

¹⁷⁰ Stuart, rev. of Halfway, 101.

¹⁷¹ Rev. of The Nightmare Factory, Virginia Quarterly Review, lx.

songbirds seriously." (Emphasis mine)¹⁷² Despite his good intentions, one wonders about his terminology. Comparing women poets to songbirds seems to portray them as happy, carefree creatures: an obvious trivialization.¹⁷³ Further in this article, directly after discussing Anne Sexton, Cotter speaks of the "parlor revolt" of women writers, another way of making little of women's poetry.¹⁷⁴ No doubt Cotter meant well in his review "Women Poets: Malign Neglect?," but his essay is, nevertheless, quite patronizing. John N. Morris points out the "slightly ladylike quality" of Kumin's poetry,¹⁷⁵ a rather meaningless phrase to be sure; one supposes that Morris assumes that the reader knows exactly what that term denotes. Sybil Estess congratulates Kumin for being an "increasingly refined, non-suicidal poet,"¹⁷⁶ another way of saying that Kumin knows how to behave. The resoundingly-positive review in the Virginia Quarterly Review is very telling: "In contrast to the many women

¹⁷² Cotter, 140.

¹⁷³ Mary Ellmann, in her Thinking About Women (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968) terms this trivialization of women "balloonism," "a conception of the woman's mind as light, fragile, drifting and buoyant. In this guise, women are considered capable of pretty ascents, but they must be controlled by masculine Ballast if they are not to blow away." (p. 113)

¹⁷⁴ Cotter, 141.

¹⁷⁵ Morris, 114.

¹⁷⁶ Estess, 99.

poets writing of anger and alienation, Kumin sticks to pastoral and tribal themes.... She remains a tough, intense, and energetic poet, more self-assured and purposeful than ever."¹⁷⁷ In essence, this assessment maintains that Kumin is a controlled, strong poet; these terms are traditionally masculine.

Clara Claiborne Park, in a review of Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief, sums up Kumin's poetry:

The world she explores is a restricted one, limited by the familiar boundaries of class, background and habit as well as by a traditionally feminine personalism that seem less inevitable today than it did...ten years ago, and is perhaps more significant for that reason.¹⁷⁸

Are not all writers limited by similar boundaries?

The Virginia Quarterly Review observes gratefully that "Kumin does not burden us with feminism"¹⁷⁹--tedious as that would be. Dana Gioia maintains that "the usual modesty of her tone does not hide her underlying self-assurance. She writes confidently about what she knows...and she does so honestly and directly without

¹⁷⁷ Rev. of The Retrieval System, Virginia Quarterly Review, 144.

¹⁷⁸ Clara Claiborne Park, "Mature Fruits," rev. of Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief, by Maxine Kumin, Nation 24-31 July 1982: 90.

¹⁷⁹ Rev. of Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief, Virginia Quarterly Review, 135.

striking fashionable postures."¹⁸⁰ Peter Stitt terms Kumin "a domestic writer who deals most effectively with issues close to home."¹⁸¹

Clearly, there is much talk in these reviews about Kumin as a woman poet. Most critics find Kumin to be tolerable as a woman: she seems to be rather inoffensive to most critics as compared to other women writers who are angry, shrill, or insistent. But why is it, beyond this reticence, that Kumin has been accepted by the critical establishment. In an interview which offers some insight on the question, Kumin cogently spoke of Sylvia Plath's acceptance:

Plath had the benefit of the Establishment. She married an established British poet. Before that, she graduated from a respected women's college. Her parents were educated, her father had been an academic. Sylvia had gone abroad on a Fulbright. And she wasn't flamboyant--she played the role of the pretty little girl.¹⁸²

Kumin made this statement to explain, in part, why she thought Plath had been better received critically than had Anne Sexton. However, this summation describes Kumin as well--with a few exceptions. Kumin also had the benefit of

¹⁸⁰ Gioia, 652.

¹⁸¹ Stitt, 558.

¹⁸² George, 12.

the establishment. Her childhood was a privileged and relatively moneyed one. Having grown up in the East--that bastion of good taste and good breeding--she earned both an A.B. and an M.A. at Radcliffe, a solid, Ivy League school. In addition, she has won numerous awards, including, of course, the Pulitzer Prize. Kumin is quite an extraordinary woman, gracious, and refined. These personal traits have been assets to her career and to her being accepted into the canon. Kumin herself has spoken to the way in which she is perceived as a woman writer:

I frequently find myself in a situation where I know I've been invited as the token heterosexual, middle-aged, middle class, i.e., safe woman. Sometimes I overturn these expectations by being very radical and saying outrageous things, but lots of times I can just see the enclave sitting there saying, 'Now let's see, who can we get who won't disgrace us?' And then they say, 'I know: Maxine Kumin. Let's see if she'll come.'¹⁸³

This perceived graciousness on Kumin's part, along with the fact that she is sometimes evaluated as not writing as a woman and at other times deemed appropriately modest and controlled, is one reason that Kumin has been relatively well-accepted by the critical establishment. Apparently, Kumin writes enough like a woman and enough like a man to

¹⁸³ Shomer and Sanford, 48.

satisfy her critics--most of the time.

Understanding Kumin's poetry requires a knowledge of the history from which she operates, as well as the context in which she is immersed. Emily Stipes Watts makes some important observations which, although they concern early American women poets, are applicable to Kumin as well. Stipes contends that "American women poets have developed their own themes, prosodic techniques, types of poems, and particular images--all elements essential to a vigorous and original poetry."¹⁶⁴ Consequently, in order to assess women's poetry fairly and accurately these differences must be remembered. For a woman experiences the world in a far different way than a man. Winifred Farrant Bevilacqua notes that, while:

in the United States, not all literary critics have displayed overt prejudices about female authors, and some women's writings have been given a place of honor within the literary canon...an unwillingness to grant women writers full equality with males has long been implicitly transmitted in the choice of texts that college students of both sexes have been assigned to read

¹⁶⁴ Emily Stipes Watts, The Poetry of American Women From 1632 to 1945, (Austin, Texas: The University of Texas Press, 1977), xv.

in literature courses. Most of these texts provide a predominantly male point of view on such general issues as growing up, seeking an identity, interpersonal relationships, male and female sexuality, the struggle to be an artist, the tensions between individual aspirations and external reality, and learning to deal with social and political problems. Women writers have been accorded relatively brief coverage in the standard literary histories, and in many of the influential critical studies designed to explore the essential spirit and style of a particular literary period or of the national literature as a whole, they have received much less emphasis than males or have been ignored.¹⁶⁵

The male perspective has defined the canon, female experience often being termed less valid or less significant. In order to have a canon which more accurately reflects the diversity of writers, one must include more than merely the experience of the white male. White males comprise only a small percentage of the overall population. For instance, in the United States males make up half the population; of those, many are men of color, so that the actual number of white males is less than 30%.

¹⁶⁵ Bevilacqua, 2.

Consequently, a canon including primarily the experience of white males is certainly not reflective of "universal" human experience as a whole--to say the least. More importantly in a literary sense, the exclusive inclusion of white males does not accurately reflect the good writers, to say nothing of other perspectives on rites of passage and other life experiences. Women must be included in this canon as well. Their experience and their writing about that experience must be valued as equally as men's experience. And women must also be allowed to write that which fulfills and which represents their experience; they must be allowed a spectrum, a range, rather than being limited by anyone's definition of what is important, whether it be a sexist white male or a feminist critic. What is needed is an inclusionary, rather than an exclusionary, canon. After all, all women do not, cannot, and should not write the same poem. As women are diverse in their needs, personalities, and intellects, so will their poetry of necessity differ greatly. Watts describes the poetry of American women:

The verse of American women does not conveniently fall into the pattern of a 'thesis.' The best women poets have been too individualistic to allow themselves or their poetry to conform to any one theme or image. In their best work, their topics have been various,

their images their own, their modes of expression as original as necessary. The vitality of their thought and feeling has dictated their poetic development. It is clear, however, that the most obvious and significant difference between the poetry of American men and that of women is their choice of theme and, correspondingly, of dominant images and personae. Moreover, at particular times, for example, 1860-1910, it was the women who were at the outer edge of prosodic experimentation and innovation.¹⁸⁶

Clearly, excluding women from the canon (or restricting them) excludes much in terms of innovation, themes, and other considerations. The canon must be revised.

Although her work shares some characteristics with other writers, Maxine Kumin is a distinct voice in contemporary American poetry. Like Robert Frost, she writes of nature, indeed having even been "twitted with the epithet 'Roberta Frost.'"¹⁸⁷ Like William Carlos Williams, Kumin seeks "in the particular to discover the

¹⁸⁶ Watts, 4.

¹⁸⁷ Hammond, 48.

universal."¹⁸⁸ Like Gwendolyn Brooks, Kumin "rework[s] items of common life, remind[ing] us that creative experience can be mined from this vast store of unshaped material.... The heightened awareness that results brings to our consciousness an interpenetration of events which lends them a new significance."¹⁸⁹ Kumin also can be likened to Elizabeth Bishop (with her strong reliance on form), to Robinson Jeffers (with his contempt for human beings as corrupt forces opposed to nature), to Marianne Moore, to Louise Bogan, to Denise Levertov: the list is endless. Despite the ways in which she resembles other poets, however, Kumin is a distinct voice in contemporary American poetry. For in her poetry Maxine Kumin bridges the traditional with the contemporary; she uses many complicated forms--some traditional, many innovative and of her own design--and she relies upon a contemporary idiom that reflects the language of her time.

Kumin shows a number of changes throughout the course of her poetry. She began writing strictly in forms--from the British, male tradition--and she evolved over the

¹⁸⁸ Alicia Ostriker, "May Swenson and the Shapes of Speculation," in Shakespeare's Sisters, Feminist Essays on Women Poets, eds. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1979): 228.

¹⁸⁹ Hortense J. Spillers, "Gwendolyn the Terrible: Propositions on Eleven Poems," in Shakespeare's Sisters, Feminist Essays on Women Poets, eds. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1979): 243.

course of her poetry so that her writing included free verse, although she continued to write within a formalized structure most of the time and although she insisted that free verse was a medium within which she works poorly:

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 so easily in this medium; they follow the breath rhythm and the normal pattern of speech. They feel totally at home where 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.¹⁹⁰

Despite her contention that she usually works within a formal structure, much of her later poetry moves more toward free verse, a movement causing Philip K. Jason to speculate that her Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief is a "reversal of form." Jason maintains that, while Kumin is a "traditionalist," her recent poetry has moved away from her "fondness for formal containment and a skill in

¹⁹⁰ Meek, 25-26.

manipulating end-sounds and tighter or looser stanzaic structures."¹⁹¹ He hopes that Kumin will not follow what he terms the pattern of the contemporary poet:

The general direction of Maxine Kumin's career is an old story in contemporary poetry, at least among the poets of Kumin's generation (of which she is a relatively young member). You begin with an immersion in craft that includes mastery of the metered line, rhythm in loud and soft types, stanzaics and fixed forms. Then, abruptly or gradually, you leave this behind because it is inhibiting, keeping you from growing, or just (you are told) an irrelevant pile of artifices in today's world. You 'relax' your technique, polish rhetorical strategies, complex ironies, and--most importantly--you become a voice-personality. This pattern has become standard procedure....¹⁹²

Although Jason seems rather less than pleased with this perceived pattern of evolution in Kumin's poetry, the change represents Kumin's coming-into-her-own as a poet.¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ Philip K. Jason, "Kumin's Ground Time: A Reversal of Form?," rev. of Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief, by Maxine Kumin, Poet Lore 78.1 (Spring 1983): 51.

¹⁹² Jason, 50.

¹⁹³ As Kumin becomes more politicized--in her later poetry, and as my interview with her confirms--she relies less on forms. Koolish maintains: "as feminists seek to

For while her poetry has changed--she relies on form less, for example--she has not totally abandoned her earlier aesthetics. Instead, her poetry has moved from being defined by the male tradition to a point at which the poet selectively chooses from the traditional to combine those aspects with a contemporary idiom, with the result that she has crafted an idiosyncratic system of poetics. The transitions through which her poetry has gone are reflective--not of entirely casting away the aspects which Jason mentions--but of her finding a personal meaning in long-standing tradition, and of translating that tradition into poetry. The early Kumin has become enriched, she has expanded her vistas, but she has not disappeared.

discover the sources and context of language and consciousness we also discard those assumptions and values which erase female experience and history. This search encourages experimentation in every facet of our lives and has encouraged women poets to experiment with form (p. 22).... Experimentation with subject matter in contemporary feminist poetry has led to a search for new forms of expression as well.... A poetic form does indeed exist which emerges out of women's experiences and is shaped by feminist consciousness and culture.... this form--actually, a multiplicity of forms--can be meaningfully described, but not definitively circumscribed (p. 20).... Form is political (p. 31).... Women are creating forms which reflect a consciousness of gender (p. 35).... Harriet Desmoines gives new meaning to Ezra Pound's famous dictum, 'make it new': 'We do this by wrenching the old words out of their patriarchal contexts (tearing apart the body of male language) and using them, reborn, to speak to women out of women's shared experience. We rename the universe out of a subjectivity that is female and animal...New naming requires exaggeration, mis-step, frequent plunges into absurdity, and a close attention to process.' (p. 23)

Chapter 2 "From A Lonely Place of Loss": Alienation,
Loneliness, Death, and Other Kinds of Loss

Manifesting itself in a number of different forms, the theme of loss occurs repeatedly throughout Kumin's work. Many poems treat this theme, some focusing on loss as the primary issue, while others emphasize different themes but include attention to loss. This chapter will examine the numerous ways the theme of loss is explored in the poetry, including attention to the attitude toward loss, the ways in which loss is manifested, and the types of loss treated. From her first book to her most recent, this theme pervades Kumin's poetry in many different variations: from loss of innocence through rites of passage, to loss through death, and in its many varieties of alienation, loneliness, death, and other kinds of loss. The poet's metaphysics become obvious over the course of her work as the reader sees the attitude toward loss begin as a desperate stance of staving off loss to a later, more reconciled position of "retrieving" the loss, of finding ways to heal the wounds. And while the purpose of this chapter is primarily to treat the forms in which the theme of loss is manifested in Kumin's poetry, some attention will also be given to the ways in which this theme evolves during the course of her eight books of poetry. To best understand Kumin's

treatment of the theme, one must recognize her changing perceptions of loss and her efforts to cope with that loss, both as poet and as human being.

Kumin's experience with/coping with loss leads her to undergo a spiritual quest--a paradigm delineated by Carol P. Christ in her Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest. During graduate study in Religious Study at Yale Christ wondered whether

[she] had a different perspective on theology because [she] was a woman. When [she] talked about the spiritual experiences that gave rise to [her] interest in theology--[her] connection to nature, the oneness with the universe [she] had experienced while swimming in the ocean or hiking in the woods--[she] was told that such experiences were 'aesthetic,' 'poetic,' 'emotional,' or 'confused' and not worthy of theological consideration.¹

Throughout the course of her poetry, and like Christ, Kumin finds "strength...from her solitude, from confronting the darkness within and without and then coming through to the other side."² Kumin's losses, especially the loss of certitude, catapult her on a spiritual journey, a "search

¹ Christ, Diving Deep..., xi.

² Christ, Diving Deep..., xiv.

for the soul"³ culminating in her experiencing spiritual resolution in nature. Christ maintains that:

Women's spiritual quest concerns a woman's awakening to the depths of her soul and her position in the universe. A woman's spiritual quest includes moments of solitary contemplation, but it is strengthened by being shared. It involves asking basic questions: 'Who am I? Why am I here? What is my place in the universe? In answering these questions, a woman must listen to her own voice and come to terms with her own experience. She must break long-standing habits of seeking approval, of trying to please parents, lovers, husbands, friends, children, but never herself.⁴

Indeed, Kumin's losses lead her to recognize that there are no constants; she realizes an existential perception of herself as a result of undergoing, then coming to terms with loss, by way of resolution of her spiritual quest.

Furthermore, Christ observes that "the quest motif, which has a long history in Western literature, appears in different forms in the new literature written by women." Traditionally, the almost-exclusive territory of men (manifested in the bildungsroman) the quest motif must also

³ Hammond, 62.

⁴ Christ, 8-9.

hold true for females as well as males--parallel but different quests. "Because female social roles are different from men's, the content of the female quest differs from that of the male."⁵

Christ describes the process of spiritual quest as one which:

begins in an experience of nothingness. Women experience emptiness in their own lives--in self-hatred, in self-negation, and in being a victim; in relationships with men; and in the values that have shaped their lives. Experiencing nothingness, women reject conventional solutions and question the meaning of their lives, thus opening themselves to the revelation of deeper sources of power and value.⁶

Kumin's experience of nothingness--an aggregate of her many losses--began with her being educated by nuns and continued as she incurred numerous losses.

From nothingness, the quest often leads to an awakening, "in which the powers of being are revealed."

A woman's awakening to great powers grounds her in a new sense of self and a new orientation in the world. Through awakening to new powers, women overcome self-negation and self-hatred and

⁵ Christ, 9.

⁶ Christ, 13.

refuse to be victims.'

Kumin's awakening comes as she finds a spiritual home in nature--a theme to be dealt with at length in Chapter Six.

Kumin's treatment of the theme of loss of innocence is varied throughout her work. Some poems show loss of innocence resulting from an unhappy childhood; others treat the linear pattern of becoming an adult, a woman--experiencing loss of innocence in that way; still others show the adult realizing her mortality. Most prominent in her earlier work, this theme of loss of innocence/rites of passage tapers off as the poet focuses on more positive examples of change.

The theme of loss of innocence appears in a number of poems about the poet's unhappy childhood. In order to reinforce the idea of loss of innocence and to make the reader keenly aware of just what the child has lost, Kumin first illustrates that there was a time in this child's life that held moments of contentment. "Views of the Coast" (H, 70) recalls the poet-child's playful explorations at the beach with her companion:

My seaweed and sand days
and ocean mending and breaking,
heels clacked on the planks overhead

⁷ Christ, 13.

where I sat in caves of my making
under the boardwalk.

Low tide was stabled there;
the sand was deliciously rank.

Yet the impending loss of innocence is hinted at even in this excerpt by the words "breaking" and "rank"; the child will inevitably be ripped from her innocence, the idea of the unknown yet to face her perhaps "deliciously rank." The word "rank" would also seem to hint at the turning of the tide of the child's life, the eventual decay and loss which is to be anticipated. The "heels clack[ing] overhead" imply the woman the child is to become--perhaps there will be discord, as clacking would suggest. Most of the "childhood memory" poems detail the life of a lonely, frightened, and alienated child so that even in a time of solitude and endless summers, there are foreshadowings of loss of bliss:

Bad days, the rain broke my heart,
pitting the sand like craters
mapped on the moon, and hissing
on iron railings.

I dreamed that my mother was missing.

She thrashed in the sea.

There is a glimmer here of upcoming loss as the child dreams her mother's absence, whether emotional or physical. A sense of a possible underside, or that part of life that holds malevolent or unpleasant things, begins to emerge.

But while there are dreams of loss, for the present they remain only dreams, separate from the wakeful reality; the dreams may eventually evolve into nightmares, however. Even in the present the menace of the dreams, as if a parallel reality, is real and is reinforced by the poet's verb choices: "broke," "pitting," "hissing," and "thrashed"--words implying violence or at least strong action: nothingness is impending.

But for the moment the child is happy, the rather ordinary happiness one might find in a normal childhood:

This is not special. All children
reserve to them caves or trenches,
eat jelly sandwiches,
beg ice cream, and love stench.

.

Sea litter, the dugouts, the ice cream
melting and lavished with grit
are a sacrament: something we had.

All children begin with it.

All children begin as innocents here in this magical world of memory, "unreasonably happy" (RS, 11, "Waiting Inland"). But here, too, there are hints that even in childhood things will not always be so easy, that there is an essential nothingness waiting to be discovered, as revealed in such lines as "melting and lavished with grit."

Indeed, innocence starts to erode as the child begins recognize pain and violence in the world. The idyllic time

of childhood begins a transformation into "the cold zoo / of childhood..." (GT, 30, "The Man of Many L's"). This change is initiated as the child haplessly observes the "clothes-prop man's" horse, suddenly gone lame:

struggling, struggling so to rise
that blood pours from his nose?
Why is he shot
on this Monday noon of my queer pinched life
as I watch from the parlor window seat?
(HBFG, 5, "The Thirties Revisited")

The child's world now has death in it. On this "Monday noon" in the "week" of her life, while she observes life from the distance of her "parlor window seat," she learns that sometimes death comes regardless of the struggle.

Another loss of childhood innocence occurs as the child learns of the violence done to Jews, a knowledge that erodes her sense of safety and which gives her further glimpses of an awaiting underside. Several poems juxtapose the image of the child safely sleeping in her bed with images of atrocities against Jews: "In '33 I was eight years old, / soon to begin the Nazi nightmares / a hundred cold / wakings upstairs / in a warm bed in Germantown, / Pennsylvania" (NF, 21, "The Amsterdam Poem").⁸ The irony

⁸ See also Sylvia Plath's poems on Nazi brutalities, particularly in Ariel (New York: Harper & Row, 1966). Ries observes that "the violence in [Plath's] poetry is a direct product of the violence in society, as the references to concentration camps, Nazi brutality and torture, wars and suicide clearly indicate. The inner and outer worlds are

of the childhood residence in "Germantown" is not lost on the poet, an irony reinforced by the word's emphatic position at the end of the line. With the poet's realization of the violence done to Jews her sleepless nights begin. This knowledge comes in a tangible form in the letters which relatives send to her father. The child is terrified by her father's reactions to these letters, and Kumin, remembering, predicts: "Warsaw will excrete its last Jews. / My father will cry like a child. / He will knuckle his eyes to my terror, over the letters that come from the grave / begging to be sponsored, plucked up, saved" (HBFG, 5, "The Thirties Revisited"). Her terror is two-fold: she is terrified by the actual letters and their contents, and she is terrified to see her father in such agony. The child begins to realize that there are such horrible things that they can make her usually stolid father "cry like a child." It is frightening for a child to see her father display such emotion. How does a child ever forget such pain, such anguish? Her life is inexorably changed: there is much pain, much evil in the world, at least some of which is inexplicable.

Another type of violence enters the child's life in the stories that the Fraulein--the nanny or governess--reads. In the guise of instructing children (and parents) on proper behavior, this poem describes four boys who

brought face to face in her poetry, and the one frequently reacts to the other in chilling ways" (p. 34).

disobeyed and then got their just desserts (H, 20, "Fraulein Reads Instructive Rhymes"). Deftly woven into the poem, an undercurrent of violence runs through the piece, and the irony of calling this instruction a "rhyme" becomes quite apparent. In the first stanza, Kaspar, "once round and fat," will not eat and so dies--as Fraulein sternly observes as she serves dinner to her charges. Stanza two introduces "Friedrich the terrible-tempered," who "pulls wings from flies," among other things and is bitten by a huge dog as punishment. Fraulein warns the children to be good "or the dog comes to eat you up." "Konrad the little thumb-sucker" is warned to cease and desist, but refuses:

Out goes the mother and wupp! goes the thumbkin
in.

Then the door opens. Enter the tailor.

See in the picture the terrible tongue in
His grinning red mouth. In his hands the great
shears.

Just as she told him, the tailor goes Klipp und
Klapp.

Eight-fingered Konrad has learned a sad lesson.

Stanza four details the demise of disobedient "smart Robert the flying boy," told not to go out into the wind, who does so and is sucked up into the sky--"Mind me, says Fraulein. God stands up in Heaven. / See how He watches? He snatches the bad ones." Certainly these are not tales designed to

inspire a sense of safety in the young listener; instead, the child is taught that life will turn on her swiftly if she disobeys.

Yet another way in which violence enters the young poet's life is through her father, well-meaning (one assumes) but also fear-inspiring. The child is terrified one night as her father chases a bat ("the terrible mouse with wings") in her bedroom, so frightened, in fact, that she magnifies the events of only two nights:

Father in a union suit
 came a hundred sultry nights,
 came like an avenging ghost.
 He waved a carpetbeater, trussed
 with scrolls of hearts and cupid wings,
 a racket with rococo strings.
 (H, 47, "A Hundred Nights")

What irony to find that the carpetbeater, the instrument of violence, is adorned with "hearts and cupid wings"--the symbols of love. Without intending it, the father terrifies the child; her pleas to cease the awful chase are underscored by the word choice in the penultimate stanza which emphasizes her agony:

I cried. I wished that they were dead.
 I begged him stuff the chimney stack.
 I pinched my lips to stay awake
 to keep those flapping rats outside,
sang to myself, told riddles, prayed.

(Emphasis mine.)

These words signify extremes of desperation on the child's part. For a hundred nights she is terrified, singing to herself to ward off the fear. Ironically, an act meant to protect the child--the capture of the bats ("My father had his principles. / He smacked to stun them, not to kill") damages the girl's sense of security. She now regards the world as a less safe place: there has been a loss of innocence.

The love/fear duality of the poet's father continues in "The Marauder" (H, 63):

When Lindbergh's boy was killed, you came to fill

my windows up with wire

and fastened me into your fear;

and we had ropes in case of fire....

I was the prize and prisoner

sealed in at bedtime, counting each steel link.

Again, though the father does not set out deliberately to frighten the child, he does so. Barring the windows and providing other kinds of protection awakens the child to the world's threats. As before, it is ironic that the act intended to keep the child safe makes her more clearly realize her vulnerability. The obsessive father, "keykeeper, strict watchman," whittles away the child's sense of being able to survive in a hostile world so that "ever since, / these little taints of violence / sit in my chest like a sixth sense, / an aura of death I cannot shrug

off." The child has now been imbued with a sense of violence, an indication of an unseemly end, and overwhelming doubts as to the security of her world. The very man who stands as a symbol of the child's security, her father, is also now a symbol of her undoing; he has become the father "who kept me safe / and put the demons in my house." There is now "an aura of death" about the child. The loss of innocence continues and cannot be reversed.

The theme of loss of innocence continues as the girl begins to think of herself as awkward and ungainly. A new-found sense of herself emerges: "(Choose this child in corkscrew curls, one eye / turning in; this frowning toddler, all bonnet / and high-laced shoes, all mouth, all longing, choose me" (P, 20, "The Album"). As the child perceives herself as being awkward, she also differentiates herself from the rest of the world. She starts to feel alienated and isolated from those around her; her physical ungainliness is a manifestation/parallel of the inner turmoil. Nowhere is this sense of being the misfit more prominent than in the child's relationship with her parents, particularly her mother:

If daughters were traded among the accessories
in the perfumed hush of Bonwit Teller's
she'd have replaced me with a pocketbook,
 ...me of the chrome-wire mouth,
the inkpot braids, one eye that looks

wrongly across at the other.

O Lady of the Chaise Lounge

O Queen of the Kimono,

I disappoint my mother.

(HBFG, 5, "The Thirties Revisited")

Because the daughter feels unable to meet her mother's expectations of what a daughter should be, she suffers from a lack of closeness, of warmth. Referring to her mother as "O Lady" and "O Queen," Kumin alludes ironically to Catholic terms of veneration and seems to mockingly worship her mother; the reader realizes that the psychic distance between child and mother must be very great indeed. Such alienation is another type of loss of innocence as the child realizes that she disappoints the mother whom she wishes to please--certainly a devastating realization.

Another estrangement occurs between the child and her parents as the child witnesses their marital discord. Such arguments further erode the child's sense of security and the girl is terrified as her father roars at her mother and "paces the upstairs hall / a large confined animal / neither wild nor yet domesticated. / About him hangs the smell of righteous wrath" (LA, 10, "Spree"). Kumin reinforces the child's horror by describing the father as an animal, with the "smell of righteous wrath" about him. The father has become terrifying and inhuman, so that the child feels alienated from him. Through this violence she has lost peace of mind, and is mortified at the goings-on

as her father roars about his wife's shopping spree. If something as superficial to the child as a shopping spree is capable of exciting her father to such wrath, what would he do--the child might wonder--if enraged at something more significant? The effect on the girl is to have her crouching fearfully beneath her bed: "Oh God it is so noisy! / Under my bed a secret stair / a gold and purple escalator / takes me nightly down under the sea" (LA, 10, "Spree"). In the loneliness of seeing her father as inhuman (while her mother is "meekly seated at the escritorio," though defiant of her husband) and in the alienation of being witness to verbal violence, the child has lost much: her parents (temporarily, at least, as she hides from their wrath) and her peace of mind. The child becomes figuratively invisible to her parents as their fight consumes them and she becomes literally invisible as well as she is hidden under the bed. Under the bed, by herself, in her imagination, the child is able to imagine a magical world with a "gold and purple escalator" that takes her away from her pain. Certainly the colors purple and gold would hint at royalty, the implication being that the child's imagination, her inner world, is a place where she can be considered a monarch. But in the world of reality, the child, "the plain one," has lost a bit more innocence, if one looks at such loss as a process.

Further rites of passage begin when innocence is lost as the child becomes a woman, aware of the changes and

power in her body, and cognizant of what her destiny promises. Penelope Washbourn observes:

The first major crisis in the life of a woman is the onset of menstruation. It shocks her radically. One day she is a child; the next she is a new reality, part of an ongoing process of life that inevitably conditions her self-understanding but whose purpose and nature she is as yet unable to comprehend. Menstruation creates anxiety, not only or particularly because of the physical discomfort or the lack of information about it, but because it implies the need for a new self-understanding based on a new body experience. Simone de Beauvoir wrote forcibly of the reactions of a girl to menstruation in terms of being trapped. 'The set fate that up to now weighed upon her indistinctly and from without is crouching in her belly; there is no escape; she feels she is caught.'

As the changes from girl to woman occur and as menstruation and sexuality become awkward new issues, the poet's mother withdraws further from her daughter, so that the girl loses both her mother and her childhood innocence simultaneously:

This is the year that my mother stiffens.

* Penelope Washbourn, "Becoming Woman: Menstruation as Spiritual Challenge," in Womanspirit Rising, A Feminist Reader in Religion, Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979): 249.

She undresses in the closet giving me
 her back as if I can't see
 her breasts fall down like pufferfish,
 the life gone out of their crusty eyes.
 But who has punctured the bathroom light?
 Why does the mattress moan at night
 and why is nothing good
 said of all the business to come
 --the elastic belt with its metal tongue--
 when my body, that surprise,
 claps me into my first blood?

(HBFG, 8, "The Thirties Revisited")

The daughter becomes further estranged from her mother who
 leaves the girl to discover by herself not only the changes
 in her surprising body, but also the new trappings that
 come with being a woman, e.g. the sanitary belt and pad.
 Her mother "stiffens" (the word choice reminding one of a
 corpse, as if her mother is closer to death now that her
 child is becoming a woman in her own right) and withdraws,
 perhaps more cognizant of her own aging body as contrasted
 with her daughter's blossoming body, and of her mortality,
 but at least inadequate to the task of answering or
 anticipating her daughter's questions, numerous though they
 must be. So as the girl loses her "innocence" and becomes
 a woman. As her body makes itself manifest, she loses her
 mother as well (perhaps her mother realizes that her
 "child" has died and a woman is now taking her place) and

must forge ahead finding her own answers for her questions.

Other types of loss of innocence occur as the child becomes an adult and begins to learn the "truth" about the world. A sense of wistfulness is evident in some of the poems as the poet recalls what life was like before the loss of innocence, before growing up. The time of childhood, the time of disillusionment, was a charmed time: "once / This was a tropic place; the inlet teemed / With water striders, mossy frogs, and we / Fished here and swam and picnicked. Then it seemed / Incredible that seasons change" (H, 13, "Breakthrough"). This memory of a pond in summer contrasts to the scene of the pond in winter which the poem describes in the present. Certainly standard literary interpretations equate summer with youth, while winter often symbolizes the waning of life. The poet recalls the pond in summer as a "tropic place," a paradise-Edenic in its beauty and childhood innocence. In summer "it seemed / incredible that seasons change," that one ages and dies, that winter comes. But "three days and nights of freeze have caught it flat / So that the underbelly shows." Now she sees the malevolent underside of life: death. And the fact that summer is being recalled during winter underscores the idea that the state of innocence, the prelapsarian, idyllic childhood, has ended. It is now little more than a memory as the poet sees the reality of the frozen pond. Winter must follow summer. The child who

once was has learned that seasons do change, that children do grow up, and that death eventually comes. Nothingness asserts itself once again. The poem ends with an injunction from the now-wiser adult:

Let skaters, circling this deceptive skim,
 Know here the ice uncorks. From this line
 Days will eat the crust off; our overland
 Revert to water, we succeed to boats,
 Lilies put up new stems, and the spring spawn
 Thicken; all this we stand on turn about.
 Nights enough will bring the peepers out.

The point at which a child fell through the ice warns of hidden danger beneath the lake, some force which would snatch a skater under with "no warning crack, no cry." But the child must beware of the fact that summer will return, with an illusion of being eternal; the life-cycles of nature will continue, cannot be ignored, and next winter the underside will again reveal itself.

Another treatment of the loss of innocence is to be found in "Junior Life Saving" (H, 11). Here the poet's swimming students learn the true nature of the lake which has always seemed so benign. In showing her class the potential danger to a rescuer of the drowning, the poet teaches that the lake can "turn sudden to a foe":

The magic seeps away.
 My heroes frown to see
 a menace in the element

they lately loved.

Class, I say (and want

to say, children, my dears,

I too know how to be afraid),

I tell you what I know:

go down to save.

The children now know that danger lurks for them, that there is an evil which can snatch a rescuer: life-saving is no longer just a game. Maternally, the instructor warns "her" students so that they may be safe. Learning of the danger and embracing it may save them. And she tells them to go down to save--literally, to take a struggling victim to the lake's bottom where the drowner least wants to be, in order that both do not perish if the rescuer becomes overwhelmed by the irrational victim. And the poem suggests a psychic trip which her students must take as well, descending into the psyche and facing one's fears and the reality of danger in order to survive. The pupils now recognize that death lurks beneath the lake's surface--with the realization of danger also comes a realization of mortality.

A further loss of innocence is illustrated in the poem "Lines Written in the Library of Congress After the Cleanth Brooks Lecture" (GT, 36). If loss of innocence is seen as the result of a series of transitions, then instances of such loss occur periodically through one's life. Kumin remembers herself at "eighteen [when she] believed / in

infinite perfectibility." She and other Radcliffe students
demonstrated for the rights of Blacks and women,

then took the subway back
to Jolly-Ups and dinners in the dorms
waited on by Irish biddies
in pale green uniforms.
Now I believe in infinite depravity....
we live suspended
between apathy and terror.
Decorum has left us.
The Silver Age tarnishes.

Once, she thought she could change the world, once, when--
she now realizes--she knew little of the world or how it
operated. In actuality she was a privileged Radcliffe
student who lived in a snug dorm, was served her dinner,
and knew little of economic and social struggle. Now she
realizes that there is not "infinite perfectibility," but
rather, "infinite depravity." Loss of innocence has again
come about as the poet recognizes that life is not full of
infinite possibility. Even her power with words--her
strongest power--her power as a poet, is limited:

Poetry
makes nothing happen.
It survives
in the valley of its saying.
Auden taught us that.
Next year another

Consultant will sit
 under the hand with the arrow
 that props the door ajar
 for metaphor.

New poets will lie on their backs
 listening in the valley
 making nothing happen
 overhearing history
 history time
 personal identity
 inching toward Armageddon.

In recalling the idealism of her youth, and in contrasting that perception with her present view of the world as "inching toward Armageddon," the poet would seem to reveal the ultimate loss of innocence: if poetry makes nothing happen, then the words she thought could effect change have no power. Consequently her power in the world, in shaping its history, is non-existent. Her idealistic notions of changing the world have vanished. In addition, the world may soon be destroyed--to echo Faulkner's Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech: "there is only the question: When will I be blown up?"--so that death might occur soon and completely for the world. For a poet to insist that "poetry / makes nothing happen" is significantly a statement of disillusionment/loss of hope/loss of innocence.

Another manifestation of loss of innocence occurs as the adult realizes her mortality. Whether by bomb or by bear (LA, xiii, "You are in Bear Country"), death is a certainty--and Kumin recognizes and addresses this in a number of poems. She speaks of her impending death in this meditation on the pasture at her farm: "We will not shorten the lives of these hemlocks and pines / in the afternoon of our own lives, yet I am sad / to think that the dell will outlast us and our / bloodlines... / Each of us whimpers his way through the forest alone" (LA, 64, "In The Upper Pasture"). Here the poet recognizes that certain natural things will outlast her. In a departure from the usual serene tone of her nature poems, Kumin mourns her approaching death and emphasizes the singularity with which one approaches death. In "whimper[ing]...through the forest alone,' each of us must find the way alone, and must face death each by each. So many more of her poems with nature as the focus take on a more pastoral air in their emphasis on the innocence and retrieval to be found in nature, that this poem is indeed unusual as it warns "is this a pastoral? Be not deceived..." There is death in this poem. "The downgrade is uncertain for us all" (H, 23, "Rehabilitation Center").

The poet further describes her sense of her own mortality as she writes an injunction, "A Verse Against Winter" (H, 68). She begins by describing the details of her eventual burial: "Ere dust sift in my mouth / and

pennies quench my eyes / and pine enwrap my thighs / and roots invade my south." Despite their poetic rendering, these are soberingly specific details. Later in the poem, she writes of the way in which she wishes to live, so as to stave off loss:

let love be in my house,
 my easy doors ajar
 for this sweet visitor;
 all tendered in this place
 concenter to immure
 the special prisoner
 set free, and folded close.

If death is certain, and it appears to be, then living fully, living with love, seems to be the only answer. The implication in the description is that one will be wedded to death, will have death as a lover too soon and for a very long time indeed, so while alive one should be life's lover, dwelling on it rather than on death.

Although dwelling on life is crucial, death should not be disregarded, for it will come quickly and permanently. "July 5th" (P, 75), is set in an old graveyard and records some of the epitaphs on the tombstones there. Interspersed with the lines of the poem--and effectively showing the manner in which death is woven into life--the epitaphs lend an eerie sense of immediacy to the poem, despite the fact that the epitaphs were written of people who died a number of years ago, one, for example, in 1778:

'Stop, passengers, as you pass by'

.

'as you are now, so once was I'

.

'--as I am now, so you will be--'

.

'prepare for death and follow me.'

These words from beyond the grave effectively portray the sober reality of death. The living person who composed the lines, or of whom they were written, has now died; as this person died, so shall we all. These lines are also chilling in their sing-song simplicity, achieving the ease of a child's rhyme: Kumin's use of this technique reinforces the fact that death is a foregone conclusion. Eerily, the dead person who wrote these words reaches the living, like a prophet. The reader must believe the prophet because these words are seemingly generated from the grave itself.

In addition to recognizing her own mortality, the poet realizes the impending deaths of those whom she loves. In her interview with Karla Hammond Kumin observes that:

Love poems, particularly, are elegies because if we were not informed with a sense of dying we wouldn't be moved to write love poems. The best love poems have that element of longing in them: that either they'll lose that love or that time will take it away. Behind the love poem there's

always that sense of regret, that sense of
doom.¹⁰

A particularly telling poem is "Your Living Head" (H, 35),
which addresses her husband's mortality:

Out of a lonely place I call
to you, walk back with me
and far off, turning, wake to feel
the hard bones of your sleep,
this wall of you, free of your self
and mine--or almost true
if sleep set free...

As her lover/husband sleeps next to her he is virtually
dead, walled off from her, inaccessible, leaving her to
"feel / the hard bones of [his] sleep," the word "bones"
further emphasizing the notion of the sleeper as dead. He
is also walled off from her, as if in a tomb. While he
sleeps, the poet speculates on how his death will feel; she
practices his loss, for she knows it will be sudden: "Women
have lain / all night with corpses, I have heard, / and
raised awake at morning to / cold stone on their flanks, /
so fleetly death can slip / invention in." The poet
realizes the inevitability of death and feels helpless in
the face of it: she can do nothing to change the fact that
they will both die, and in fact, the process has been in
motion for some time:

¹⁰ Hammond, 6.

I close on your breath,
 a mild feast, faintly sour,
 tasting your last cigarette
 and acid of your dream.
 Nothing you know, the kiss
 hangs loose about your mouth.
 Woman I am to see you first
 outflung, I damn the dead man
 you will be, the dead
 that we will be.

His breath is "faintly sour," as if smelling of death, of decay. She tastes his "last cigarette" as "she close[s] on his breath": she closes on his breath as if practicing him dead, the cigarette, as if the final cigarette of a man condemned to death. And finally, she damns her fate, wanting to control that which will not be controlled. With the man she loves sleeping beside her, the poet is alone in her thoughts: "From a lonely place / of loss, I stare the black waves down, / willing the night away / until distinctions build / your living head / between me and the day." Alone in her anguish, in her memories of losses suffered and in dread of those yet to be suffered, she perseveres, staving off death stubbornly until she sees the "living head" of the sleeper beside her--a bridge to the daylight, to life. It is as if she reminds herself that although death is coming--and a death which must be experienced alone--there still is life to be lived and her

lover's head against the dawn reminds her, too, of the possibilities of love, the reaching out to another to bridge the loneliness. So in her state of loss, of recognizing that death awaits, the poet desperately looks to love for comfort.

Along with the recognition of mortality--both hers and others'--the poet suffers from the realization that she can do nothing to alter her destiny. In the poem "One Dead Friend" (H, 91), Kumin reveals her sense of the world as one that is arbitrary: "Now you are ash and chips of bone / and your maimed wife lies down alone / and there is only left to curse / the random clock of universe." One has no control over one's fate. As life is arbitrary, so death is arbitrary as well, selecting its victims at random and unfairly. Kumin implements this theme in several poems, one of which describes her chancing upon spiderlings "in a calm second summertime / of November":

I followed the gossamer over the field
until I lost it, and felt the loss.

.

I think of spiders hardly seen,
weavers of hinges, brails, and trusses,
and in the last, drifters, dependers
on air sifts to tug them over
towns, fields, suburbs, marshes,
even oceans they can drown in,
over islands they can drop to,

growing up or dying where they land.

(H, 53, "The Gossamer")

The spiderlings are entirely at the mercy of the environment in which they live, so that life and death are completely arbitrary. They are dependent upon "air sifts" and other natural factors and they have no control over their fates. This poem functions as an extended metaphor for the human condition: human beings also have no control over their fates ultimately, although small and insignificant choices can be made--they are at the mercy of many different elements. But the choices or factors governing life and death are essentially choices over which one has no control: they are, in essence, involuntary, non-choices.

Sometimes what seem like choices are not. When we think we are making choices we are actually hastening our own deaths as our actions contribute to the machinations of fate. The poem "The Rites" (H, 43), describes the process of falling in love, of mating, of renewal: "Even knowing death is in / the first touch, sealing the contract, / how we hurry out to dance!" Each step/transition/choice in one's life moves one that much closer to death. And while this poem indicates the ongoing reality of life cycles/the life force, and hence would be a precursor to the retrieval poems, this poem evokes the machine of life. Even the description of spring conjures images of destruction:

Each year, like a last chance,
 the simple rites of unsheathing
 from winter undo us: clumped buds burst,
 the scarred earth swells, oozing puddles,
 storm windows are layered off,
 housewives vexed by the mud
 storm the rooms for covert dirt,
 scrub winter out like an undershirt
 despised, yet loving the loosening.

Spring is a harbinger of death here, both reminding of past death and foretelling of death to come. Each new spring brings one closer to death. Again, the word-choice emphasizes the attendant violence: "burst," "scarred," "swells" and "storm." The alliteration in this segment--both assonance and consonance--as well as the use of monosyllabic words, slows the pace of the poem and emphasizes the concepts in the two lines: "clumped buds burst, / the scarred earth swells...." The repetition of the consonants, in particular the b's and d's (with the explosive characteristics in terms of pronunciation) adds force to the description of a violent spring. Additionally, the words "oozing puddles" call forth images of seeping wounds--not a quick arterial bleeding, but the slow kind that inevitably kills. Spring at once symbolizes both renewal and death.

One renewal to which the poem alludes is the renewal love can provide. Kumin sets up the dichotomy of love vs.

death for the first time in this poem, portraying love as such a vital force that it can offer hope to those who have none in the face of upcoming death. And while this type of renewal will be examined further in the tribal chapter, it is important to include this poem here, for while it offers glimmers of renewal, of hope, those glimmers are short-lived and seasonal:

So love creeps in again where a cog
ticks round, meshing its synchronous
teeth in a fair time. A new machine
for redemption runs with rugs to beat,
with linens for the sun to eat
white again in a world where Eros
is seldom called by name, but nagged,
tugged, wheedled, stroked, wiped dry,
willful in spring, in propriety.

Kumin sets up a perfect life and death contrast here. Spring, while offering glimpses of death, offers hope as well; much in the same way that Spring bursts its frozen ground, love is forced into being. The death-machine, the life-cycle, becomes a "new machine / for redemption," but is only "willful in spring." Perhaps this is to say that love can redeem in the spring of one's life, in one's youth, but as one nears winter, the inevitability of one's fate becomes obvious: nothing can halt the life-cycle. As surely as spring arrives every year, so does winter eventually follow. There is no escape, no control over

one's destiny. Even what seem to be choices are only illusions, hastening one's death as they do.

In the face of lack of control over one's fate the poet manifests an attitude of gritting her teeth and actively fighting off death. In "Poem For My Son" (H, 80), Kumin writes of a near-drowning during a tiring swim:

I foundered, dizzy,
uncertain which was better:
to fall there and unwind
in thirty feet of water
or fight back for the land.
Life would not let me lose it.
It yanked me back by the nose.
Blackfaced and thick with vomit
it thrashed me to my knees.
We only think we choose.

The reality here is that one has no control over one's fate; the survival instinct, a force distinct from the poet, rescues her. There is a sense of Calvinist determinism as the poet writes of the choice of living or dying as not a choice at all, but one which is pre-ordained, already fated. Kumin ends the poem by instructing her son: "But say we choose. Pretend it. / My pulse knit in your wrist / expands. Go now and spend it. / The sea will take our kiss. / Now, boy, swim off for this." One must be brave in the face of certain death, of random fate, for to lose hope is to lose all. Her son must

believe that he has some type of control over his life and that he has reason to hope. Kumin offers him the notion of continuity, of the life-force which continues despite everything, of retrieval as his pulse mirrors her own--as she continues in this fashion, through her son, so perhaps will he continue as well.

The poet recognizes her mortality and her lack of control over her fate anew as she is beset by loss of youth and by the onset of middle age, as well as by the loss of a body in perfect working order--the loss of health. In a poem to Anne Sexton, Kumin announces: "The middle age you wouldn't wait / for now falls on me..." (RS, 14, "Progress Report"). The implication is that experiencing middle age is twice as difficult because Kumin takes on Sexton's unowned middle age as well as her own. The use of the word "falls" is interesting as well in its implication of crushing force. Later Kumin notes that Thomas Mann asked for refuge in Switzerland:

'for literary activities and
for the passage of life's evening.'
I wonder if all those he loved
and outlived showed up nights
for chips of reconstructed
dialogue under the calm Alps,
he taking both parts, working it out.
Me taking both parts in what
I suppose is life's afternoon.

In comparing her "afternoon" with Thomas Mann's "evening," Kumin recognizes the loss of her youth and the transition from middle age to old age, and then to death. Youth is lost and death approaches.

In another poem to Sexton, "Apostrophe to a Dead Friend" (GT, 24), Kumin further treats the loss of youth:

Little by little my gender drifts away
 leaving the bones of this person
 whose shoe size was your size
 who traded dresses in our pool
 of public-occasion costumes:
 yours the formal-length jersey
 mine the cocktail wool
 and your dead mother's mink coat that
 I always said looked like muskrat.

The poet seems not to know "this person" who is becoming androgynous; it is as if she is becoming alienated from her self. The trappings of femininity--here "public-occasion costumes," and "mink coat[s]"--which the poet shared with her dead friend, are things of the past. And as gender fades, other things, once vital and important, fade as well:

the glint of those afternoons
 we lay in the sun by the pond.
 Paler, the intimate confidences.
 Even the distances we leapt in poems
 have shrunk. No more parapets.

The men have grown smaller, drier,
easier to refuse.

Passion subsides like a sunset.

Urgency has been wrung from the rendezvous.

The poet has lost and continues to lose vitality from her life. The memories of her dear friend have become distant and less distinct, the acuity and insight of her poetry seem to have dimmed, and the "passion" and "urgency" of the sexual drive are now more memory than reality. Relentlessly, the "afternoon" of her life, now at "sunset," proceeds into evening. The loss of youth and the arrival of that which follows are decidedly burdensome:

Soon I will be sixty
How it was with you now
hardly more vivid than how
it is without you, I carry
the sheer weight of the telling
like a large infant, on one hip.
I who am remaindered in the conspiracy
doom, doom on my lips.

Remaindered, left like an unwanted book, the poet, "doom, doom on [her] lips," faces death, the memory of her dead friend now receding as her own death draws near and therefore becomes more real. Kumin is stuck with the telling of Sexton, of her life, of her death, of their friendship, and the telling is burdensome. In remembering Sexton, Kumin measures what she has lost, measures the

person she was against the person she is now.

Kumin also realizes mortality as she is faced with the loss (albeit temporarily, fortunately) of a body in perfect working order. The temporary disabilities she details foreshadow more permanent ones to come as the insults of age take hold. "Post-op: Lying Flat" (NF, 78), describes the poet's loss of her former healthy life: "In my new life I am a cripple. / What I am may be a cure / for what I was." The fact that her body is not working so well as it once did is a harbinger of similar insults to follow. If "what she was" was innocent of disability/pain/approaching death, then the "cure" is a heightened awareness of mortality: good health is fleeting and seems very distant when one is ill. The poem continues as she exhibits impatience and dissatisfaction: "Today the sky splits revealing snow. / I ask the neurosurgeon, When will I walk? / Frost humps in. The ground hardens. / I, a complainer of some standing, demand to know." While the poet lies flat, as she will in death, "the sky splits revealing snow," "frost humps in," and "the ground hardens": infirmity and death move closer. But the "complainer of some standing," will not let this disability defeat her; she will fight it off as she will fight death off, "demand[ing] to know" when she will walk again, when she will be able to fully re-enter life.

Another poem treating the concept of loss of a body in perfect working order is "The Leg" (HBFG, 60), a poem that

details the surprise of a broken leg: "I thought I had you memorized, good fellow." The leg she had taken for granted, had thought she knew, with its "ankle throb," "two bright veins," "hard pillow / of a swimmer's calf," and "bony knee," has been fooling her as she realizes she has never believed the leg capable of such betrayal:

So I'm to take you back, a wasted eel,
 hairy and helpless, yet somehow attached.
 You waggle in the wheelchair, scaly and spent.
 You can't attend a single simple rule.
 Bending's a desperate forgotten habit.
 To move at all you must be flexed
 by hand. Stretched out you tremble
 at the least touch like a snared rabbit.

This "wasted eel" is different from the leg she's always known--a stranger. Like a baby, the leg has no control and little capacity for movement, now "birthed" from the plaster cast. Yet the poet gets to retrieve this newly-mended leg for a second chance, telling it: "Come little one...come summer and we'll walk"--this time she gets the lost leg back, but there will come a time when the second chances are used up.

The poet also recognizes her mortality when she suffers the loss of health that requires surgery and leads to much pain. In "Pain: 1967" (NF, 73), pain is presented as a force for initiating the poet into the rites of passage that take her just a bit closer to death. Here the

first pain of this type is compared to the first sexual experience--both losses of innocence, rites of passage:

The lore of it is something they keep from you.
As with sex, the mechanics are little rehearsed.
Not even among grown men and women the specifics

yes he unbuttoned her, yes she was a good lay
but how? and in exactly what circumstance?

Pain is a mystery, "comes in dressed up like a spy," ready to seduce the hapless patient. Precursor to death, pain becomes "quick poison" holding the promise of something secret, perhaps how death will feel:

At night rowing out to sea on drugs, rowing out
on my little oars, those carefully deployed
spoons,
sometimes I think I catch a glimpse of that body
of knowledge. It is the fin of a flying fish.
It is a scrap of phosphorescent plankton
I would take hold of crying, wait!
Thinking, tell me.

Pain holds secret knowledge, perhaps the knowledge of death, since pain is a small death. But it is elusive. Not too much knowledge can be gained before the fact, merely a glimmer of what is to come. The loss of innocence is gradual, meted out in regular doses.

The perfect working order of the body is disrupted equally by physical and mental problems, as the poet

notices in "Henry Manley, Living Alone, Keeps Time" (RS, 25). Kumin's elderly neighbor is losing his memory, losing his ability to name his world:

Sundowning

the doctor calls it, the way
 he loses words when the light fades.
 The way the names of his dear ones
 fall out of his eyeglass case...
 Terror sweeps him from room to room.
 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.

Kumin continues her metaphor of the stages of the day (here represented by "sundowning") to illustrate the stages of life. At this point Henry is easing toward his death, his mind flickering as if ready to be extinguished. And although he is unable to name parts of his world, he is able to name what is happening to him: he is approaching death, "he knows how much he has departed his life." But this is to be a gradual loss of memory, of life--sundown is not full evening, is not fully death. Instead, he is given life in bits and pieces, a few more days, so that while he sleeps:

The names of faces are put back
 in his sleeping mouth. At first light
 he gets up, grateful once more
 for how coffee smells. Sits stiff
 at the bruised, porcelain table
 saying them over, able
 to with only the slightest catch.
 'Coffee. Coffee cup. Watch.'

Returned to life from the death of sleep, Henry is able to remember things "with only the slightest catch." During the light of day there is only a slight reminder of his hastening date with death as he sits "stiff" at his "bruised" table, trying to reverse the loss, "able / to with only the slightest catch."

In addition to these varieties of loss of innocence, the poetry treats many other kinds of loss, one of which is loss through alienation and separation. There is the loneliness that comes from an existential realization of one's aloneness in the world, there is alienation from those to whom one should be closest, and there is loss through separation as lovers part and as children grow up and move away.

A number of poems address loss of connectedness, loneliness. The realization of one's existential isolation in the world is one that alters forever one's life path.

This recognition is furthered by what Mary Daly terms a woman's confrontation with non-being: "As the ultimate aliens, perennial outsiders in a 'man's world,' women are beginning to be able to...experience nothingness--to see that the entire social structure, meaning structure, and language structure bequeathed to [them] essentially exclude [them] as full human beings. [Women] become recognizable to [themselves] as extra-environmentals. This seeing requires existential courage...."¹¹ Once again there are echoes of Carol Christ's notion of spiritual quest here.

The poem "The Lonely One" (P, 9), describes the loneliness and the isolation that can lead one to perceive oneself as being on the outside looking in. Here the poet drives down a street past midnight, conjuring up people who are engaged fully with life:

Alone here,

I will people the fallen hours with bakers
up to their wristbones in the yeasty vats,
with cub reporters covering the peacemakers,
merciful squad cars, sirens on full tone,
a watchman tipped back in his chair reading
Dickens,
all manner of lovers locked in the sure vault
of each other, mothers with newborns buttoned

¹¹ Mary Daly, "A Call for the Castration of Sexist Religion," in Sexist Religion and Women in the Church, ed. Alice L. Hageman (New York: Association Press, 1974): 126.

at breast.

I will leave no one alone.

From her isolated vantage point, the poet imagines people busily involved in life. Even the watchman--who presumably keeps his vigil alone--has Dickens for company. There are relationships, bonds, and intimacies excluding the poet and symbiotic and intense in their reciprocity: "lovers locked in the sure vault / of each other, [and] mothers with newborns buttoned / at breast." These are solid, exact intimacies as the poet describes them, intimacies that are natural, that fit perfectly, and from which the poet feels totally excluded, as is the natural order of things. But though the poet is alone driving down the deserted night streets, the streets of the dark underside revealing the hidden loneliness of those who are excluded from intimate relationships, the streets that, at night hint of death--as if the poet is an unseen spirit roaming the town--but during the day do not hint of the loneliness they promise, she continues to be able to stave off most foreboding. She remains "intact, a little dread joggling [her] elbows"--although she is lonely and isolated, she perseveres.

Another type of existential loneliness occurs as the poet recognizes that she is estranged from those to whom she should be closest: husband, children, parents, and other relatives. Kumin uses the familiar image of the family photo album, holding the bits and pieces of an intimate history, to show that all we know of our

progenitors and progeny is scattered freeze-frame glimpses. In "The Album" (P, 20), she describes the pictures that catch her family at certain points in their lives. The distance she feels from these people is magnified in her finally calling her parents "Mother-and-Father," a phrase suggesting that her parents are a unit, androgynous, bereft of human qualities: "As much as anyone knows / of Mother, of Father, of Fraulein / stiffening overnight / are these strangers, wearing strangers' clothes." We never really know those to whom we should be closest; we can only know aspects, fragments of them, we cannot know their souls. We are each alone in our existential loneliness and can make only limited contacts with others. While this notion of alienation from family has limited place in Kumin's poetry--in that she mostly writes that love and the sense of the tribal can conquer much--it is a theme appearing consistently throughout her poetry and which is at war with her more reassuring concepts of family and love. This view of family as strangers caught at various points in their lives also presents the family as a foregone conclusion: the album maps out lives--births, marriages, deaths, and other rites of passage--so that one has the sense of the path the poet has followed and will follow, the destiny that is hers. And while there is a sense of comfort/continuity inherent in looking at what has been and what is to come, there is also a sense of being unable to escape one's history, one's future, one's fate.

Yet another type of loss occurs as lovers separate. What began as something wonderful and passionate, "the burst of colors, the sweetgrass of two tongues," ends distastefully:

in an Albert Pick hotel
with the air conditioner gasping like a carp
and the bathroom tap plucking its one-string harp
and the sourmash bond half gone in the open
bottle,

that it should end in this stubborn disarray
of stockings and car keys and suitcases,
all the unfoldings that came forth yesterday
now crammed back to overflow their spaces,...

(NF, 69, "At the End of the Affair")

With the end of the affair comes alienation, estrangement, and separation; the once romantic is now sullied. The joy of the relationship has been lost.

Some relationships are not lost altogether, but their nature changes significantly so that certain aspects disappear. Such is the nature of the relationships with one's children, as Kumin observes. Children are lost in several ways: they grow up and they follow their own destinies, they become distant and estranged, and they move away. Such changes may not result in total estrangement in the parent-child relationship, but they alter irrevocably the intimacy and sense of connection between parents and

children.

An immense altering of the parent-child relationship occurs as the children grow up. In "Feeding Time" (GT, 7) the poet contemplates this change as she sets about at sunset--middle age--feeding the animals, the creatures for whom she cares. Having taken care of the horses, dogs, birds, and cats, the poet turns to the missing children who no longer need this kind of care and nurturing. As she prepares the food for her husband and herself, Kumin muses:

Now us,
 Dear One. My soup, your bread
 in old blue bowls that have withstood
 thirty years of slicings and soppings.
 Where are the children
 who ate their way through helpings
 of cereals and stews
 to designs of horse, pig,
 sheep on view
 at the bottom of the dish?
 Crying, 'when I grow up,'
 children have got their wish.

The children have grown up and left the parents with memories and with old blue bowls. The once-uttered threat, "when I grow up," has come true and the parents have lost their young. They are left with empty rooms and empty spaces in their lives. In the poem "For My Son on the Highways of His Mind" (NF, 42), Kumin writes about her

son's empty room:

Meanwhile the posters on your bedroom wall
 give up their glue. The corners start to fray.
 Belmondo, Brando, Uncle Ho, and Che
 last year's giants, hang lop-eared but hang on.
 The merit badges, the model airplanes, all
 the paraphernalia of a simpler day
 gather dust on the shelf. That boy is gone.

It almost sounds as if the bedroom is now a shrine to the
 dead boy--dead in the sense that the boy has died and now a
 man exists in his place. The boyhood, the childhood, is
 now over and falling, fraying posters and paraphernalia are
 all that remain--the posters falling and fraying as the
 child/parent relationship falls and frays as well. Once
 the formerly innocent and sweet-natured children enter
 puberty, they become churlish and difficult:

Anger does this.

Wishing the furious wish
 turns the son into a crow
 the daughter, a porcupine.

Soon enough, no matter how
 we want them to be happy
 our little loved ones, no
 matter how we prod them
 into our sun that it may
 shine on them, they whine

to stand in the dry-goods store.

Fury slams in.

The willful fury befalls.

(RS, 30, "Changing the Children")

No matter what the wishes of the parents, no matter if the parents would wish their children forever cooperative and docile, the children must follow their own destinies. They must grow, they must separate themselves from their parents, and usually they must make this process painful for everyone involved. Once the loss of childhood occurs and adolescence ensues, with its promise of adulthood, there is no turning back--the pre-change child disappears, leaving an angry changeling in its place.

The children disappear but--with luck--they may return transmuted:

Eventually we get them back.

Now they are grown up.

They are much like ourselves.

They wake mornings beyond cure,

not a virgin among them.

We stand in the kitchen

slicing bread, drying spoons,

and tuning in to the weather.

The creatures which the parents "get back" are not, however, the same ones they lost. These new children have lost their innocence in more than just the sexual aspect: the children are now grown, are now adults, and are now

"civil" to their parents--formal, distant. They stand in the kitchen with their parents, performing the everyday chores that one might amicably carry out around strangers. The children and their parents have become distant, estranged, "at arm's length always" (LA, 14, "Expatriate"). There is loss of nurturing and intimacy, but the children must be "shot from the parents / [as] this is the celestial arrangement" (RS, 32, "Parting").

A final way in which the theme of loss of children permeates Kumin's work is through the idea of physical separation in addition to the emotional/mental/intellectual separation previously detailed. A telling few lines are in "Address to the Angels" (RS, 7), as Kumin sarcastically inquires of the angels, whom Billy Graham terms "God's secret agents":

And when

my black-eyed susan-child ran
off with her European lover
and has been ever since an unbelonger,
were you whirligiging over
the suitcases? Did you put
your imprimatur on
that death-by-separation?

When a child moves to another continent, it is as if that child has died--she is most inaccessible. The other children have moved away as well and are now only occasional visitors to their parents' farm: "The children,

/ all grown and scattered, cross / time zones now and then
 to visit, / victims of the oldest feelings / that nothing
 changes, everything is broken. / So be it" (LA, 59,
 "Sundays in March"). The grown children are distant enough
 that they must "cross time zones" to visit their parents.
 That they--parents and children--live in different time
 zones implies further the emotional and "life" distances
 between them. While the older adults are drawing ever
 nearer the completion of their travel through adulthood,
 the young adults are just beginning their own journey.
 They are at different times in their lives. And while the
 poet's attitude in this poem is "so be it," elsewhere she
 feels her loss very keenly and wishes her children back.
 Recalling her daughter's science project (boiling down and
 then reconstructing a chicken skeleton) the poet mourns her
 child's absence, wanting her back:

This Friday your letter in thinnest blue
 script alarms me. Weekly you grow
 more British with your 'I shalls'
 and now you're off to Africa
 or Everest, daughter of the file drawer,
 citizen of no return. I give
 your britches, long outgrown, to the crows,
 your boots with a summer visit's worth
 of mud caked on them to the shrews
 for nests if they will have them.

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.

(RS, 33, "Seeing the Bones")

The "daughter of the file drawer," (as the poet files away her letters) is off to any part of the world except her mother's house. Weekly she grows more distant from her mother, from the life they once shared. In fact, the only way that the poet can retrieve this "citizen of no return" is to conjure her up with "baby teeth, some new / nail parings and a hank of hair," boiling these things together as if in a witch's cauldron, casting a spell to get her child back.

A final type of loss that appears in Kumin's work is the theme of loss through death. Such deaths abound in Kumin's work to the extent that the poet often writes of being overwhelmed: "always / I think that no one / can be sadder than I am" (RS, 7, "Address to the Angels"). She also reveals her exasperation with the losses she has suffered: "I am tired of this history of loss! / What drum can I beat to reach you? / To be reasonable / is to put out the light. / To be reasonable is to let go" (P, 79, "September 22nd"). In the face of overwhelming loss, even when tired beyond her limits, the poet maintains that she must grit her teeth and fight off death, hating loss all

the while--she must be unreasonable.

Kumin writes of losing many loved ones to death. She has lost her father (to whom and about whom she writes many poems) as well as her mother (the poems about whom focus less on her death--except to call it easy--and more on her power, hence her mother will not be here included). There are also poems concerning the loss of her adult brother to a debilitating muscular disease. A number of poems address Anne Sexton, Kumin's best friend for over 17 years who committed suicide after several tries. And, finally, there are poems treating the deaths of her dear animals. While these are not the only deaths of which Kumin writes, they are the ones on which she focusses most frequently and intensely.

Many of Kumin's poems concern her father, and of these a substantial number focus on his death. Although the poems portray her relationship with her father as a complicated one, full of both anger and love--and often, a "love ingrown / tight as an oyster" (P, 14, "The Pawnbroker")--her father's death is profoundly disturbing. In "Lately at Night" (P, 17), the poet writes:

Father

lately I find myself repairing

at night by inches the patchwork of your death...

Tonight again

you who had sworn off funerals
 and said you'd have us send out for champagne
 lie stuffed and stitched like a suckling pig
 prettied up for the fiesta.

Even from the doorway your profile
 sticks up against air and velvet like a cutaway
 springing erect in a child's pop-out book.

It is absurd that her father has died, an absurdity reinforced by the description of her father in his coffin as a "fiesta suckling pig," or a "cut-away in a child's pop-out book." The memories of seeing her father, embalmed and laid-out, become absurd to the poet as she relives her father's death ad infinitum. The absurdity is not lessened by the fact that in the face of the death, of grief, she and her brothers must attend to the practical aspects of burying her father:

We whisper over you, doing business:
 the middle-priced blanket of flowers,
 a car to call for the reverend,
 organ music to muffle the heels of all comers,
 and for our mother's dizziness
 two ushers to superintend.

The funeral turns into an "extravaganza" and the whole thing seems to be an elaborate function to be arranged. It is almost as if the poet and her brothers are arranging a bachelor's party for their father to prepare him for this wedding with death:

But where are the belly dancers,
 the cake that breaks open,
 the whiskey and rattlers and three-corner party
 hats
 and in this extravaganza
 where is the gently tipsy old lady
 who comes on at a foxtrot,
 whisking you under the archway and out,
 as simply as that.

Despite the fact that "doing business" over the dead and
 arranging for guests takes on this air of absurdity, the
 actuality and circumstances of her father's death reassert
 themselves in the poet's mind. In the face of the
 "extravaganza" of the funeral there are still the
 unavoidable facts of his death. Struck by the absurdity of
 the whole thing--the elaborate arrangements, the budgeting
 of money, the production of a "show"--she is compelled to
 remember the details of the death:

I will tell them
 you died with three days' whiskers on your face.
 I will tell them
 the final blip from the wires
 daringly threaded into your heart
 to keep the pace
 announced itself on the radar screen
 and faded down the track,
 one small plane easing itself over the horizon,

and not the gas mask full of oxygen
 and not the long shots of adrenalin
 and nothing lusty left could haul you back.

In contrast to the festive atmosphere of the funeral, these are the stark facts of her father's death. One has the sense of the poet watching her father's decline, watching the heroic and extreme efforts aimed at saving her father's life and which do not succeed. The contrast between the reality of the death and the unreality of the funeral, as well as the actual fact that her father has died continue to haunt the poet. She suffers her loss nightly:

Father,
 lately at night as I watch your chest
 to help it breathe in
 and swear it moves, and swear I hear the air
 rising and falling,
 even in the dream it is my own fat lungs
 feeding themselves, greedy as ever.
 Smother, drown, or burn, Father.
 Father, no more false moves, I beg you.
 Back out of my nights, my dear dead
 undergroundling.
 It is time...

Physically dead, the poet's father refuses to stay dead at night. The underside, the parallel reality of Kumin's life returns her father to her nightly, despite her best efforts to keep him dead, so that she suffers his death anew each

night: "let / the dead skin of your forehead / be a cold coin under my lips." She implores him to return to the dead. Ironically, despite the best medical efforts, her father's life could not be saved--nothing could keep him from death--yet nothing is able to keep him from returning to life, from struggling to breathe in her dreams.

Another loss addressed in Kumin's work is the loss of her adult brother--a painful and progressive loss as the poet helplessly watches her brother grow increasingly feeble and incapacitated. And while, with her father, dreams provide the major source of pain--after the initial shock of her father's death--with her brother the dreams are less awful than the reality of her brother's slow death:

A habit I can't break, caring.

.

this brother I love, in real life shriveled
by a disease that wastes the large muscles.

.

Stickered like a housefly to the ceiling
a small watcher whispers, 'this is
only a dream.' I take it, I run it through.
It is less terrible
than what I wake to.

(GT, 26, "The Unfinished Story")

In this case the parallel reality of the dream--which has her healthy brother announce that he has six months to live

and so means to seize life while he can--is less awful than the reality which has her brother dying slowly, a bit every day. A fast, clean loss is to be preferred to a slow, drawn-out one. For losing life a bit at a time is the most difficult:

The first was easy. You gave up your left hand
and the right grew wiser, a juggler for its king.
When the poor dumb leg began to falter
you took up an alpenstock for walking
once flourished Sundays by our dead father.
Month by month the battleground grew thinner.
When you could no longer swallow meat
we steamed and mashed your dinner
and bent your straw to chocolate soda treats.
(GT, 30, "The Man of Many L's")

The poet watched her brother die a day at a time, losing him a painful day at a time. Loss through death, in itself a horror, becomes that much more painful when it happens slowly.

Loss through death can also occur through suicide and brings another type of special pain. Several of Kumin's poems address the loss of Anne Sexton. Many of the poems about Sexton have a tone that suggests there is a dialogue continuing, though one of the participants is dead--such is the profundity of the loss, a loss constantly with the poet. One would think that because they were trusted critics and friends in the creative life, the life of

poetry, as well as in other aspects of their lives, that even the act of writing, from time to time, would make the poet feel her loss anew. Kumin speaks of the way she would reverse the days of her friend's death, undoing the suicide:

I think of the last day of your life,
 old friend, how I would unwind it, paste
 it together in a different collage,
 back from the death car idling in the garage,
 back up the stairs, your praying hands unlaced,
 reassembling the bites of bread and tuna fish
 into a ceremony of sandwich,
 running the home movie backward to a space
 we could be easy in, a kitchen place
 with vodka and ice, our words like living meats.

(RS, 46, "How It Is")

But, obviously, this reversal cannot take place, so the poet must live with her loss, painful as it is.

The final type of loss to be here discussed is the loss of animals which the poet has experienced. With her unique connectedness to nature, Kumin becomes very attached to her animals so that their loss affects her in profound ways. The poet's connection with her animals is revealed by the fact that she dreams of them:

In dreams and truth I rake
 cut clover, timothy

wound up in vetch, such sweets
as the acreage allows.

I also dream gaunt cows
heads down in their own dung
and crueler images:
the ribs of all my dears
picked famine dry and hung
for lesser foragers.

(NF, 17, "Night, the Paddock, Some Dreams")

Animals are a part of the poet's life even in the parallel reality of the dream. She feeds them in her dreams as she does during her waking hours, and she suffers as she thinks of her "dears" killed and mutilated. All animals die eventually, of course, so the dream images of the dead animals are precursors to the waking reality.

A more specific poem addressing her animals' deaths and hinting at the nature of the relationship between the poet and her animals is "For a Shetland Pony Brood Mare Who Died in Her Barren Year" (NF, 3). The loss of this mare is something Kumin feels very deeply, as revealed in the language and tone in this segment of the poem:

By midsummer all the foals
had breached, except the ghost
you carried. In the bog
where you came down each noon
to ease your deer-thin hoofs in mud,

a jack-in-the-pulpit cocked
 his overhang like a question mark.
 We saw some autumn soon
 that botflies would take your skin
 and bloodworms settle
 inside the cords and bands
 that laced your belly,
 your church of folded hands.

In this poem, which seems to be addressed to the mare rather than just being about her, Kumin takes on a reverential tone with images such as a "jack-in-the-pulpit" and the "church of folded hands." The poet knew that the mare would die someday, but was not prepared for it so soon, and consequently, the loss is even greater. The measure of the loss is underscored by the tone of the poem, which treats the mare as a sentient being, and even more than that:

But all in good time, Trinket!
 Was it something you understood?
 Full of false pride
 you lay down and died
 in the sun,
 all silken on one side,
 all mud on the other.

It is as if the horse has a knowledge that the human beings do not as she dies falsely pregnant, falsely imbued with life. There is a glimmer here of Kumin's special regard

for animals; they are superior to human beings in some ways: they are innocent while human beings exhibit glaring depravity and they are also privy to a body of knowledge and understanding to which human beings do not have access. The malevolent underside--which has the horse falsely pregnant--deceivingly full of life yet dying instead, is also evident here. To have animals is to know the underside, is to know death, is to know loss.

The theme of loss appears throughout Kumin's work, and touches every aspect of it. In her early poetry the poet's attitude toward loss is one of trying to will away the thought of death. In her later poetry, Kumin turns to various methods of retrieval to attempt to ease the pain of loss and to make some sense of it. Consequently, most of the poems dealing with loss and its accompanying agony, and primarily excluding efforts of retrieval, appear in her earlier work, while retrieval poems appear primarily in her later work. The theme of loss, with all of its varieties and manifestations, is a theme which is seminal to and which pervades Kumin's work. And it is especially important, as the next chapter will detail, that the poet moves from a stance of feeling helpless against her fate, against loss, to a position of being able to find ways of reclaiming and retrieving loss.

Retrieval of Loss

In addition to those which center on loss, many of Kumin's poems focus on its retrieval. Represented most clearly in her sixth book of poetry, The Retrieval System--although the theme is not limited to this volume--the concept of retrieval is an important one to Kumin.¹ "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."² Permitting the poet to transcend pain, the process of retrieval consists of a hard-won victory over loss, a painfully-wrought recollection of those most precious to her. Her poetry is "populated with insistent ghosts--'the absent ones'--cousins, uncles, parents, whose lives she has been 'assigned / to remember,' and her own children, grown and gone from home"³ so that she has lost them in a "death-by-separation" (RS, p.9, "Address to the Angels"). "For Kumin it is people and not

¹ Harvey Curtis Webster terms the "retrieval" system "a fine binding metaphor" for The Retrieval System. ("Six Poets," 232.)

² Estess, 103.

³ Meek, 83-84.

houses who are haunted. But in the course of [her poetry] Kumin works the slow transition from ghosts, through nightmare, to the clarity of things."⁴ It is this transmutation that is crucial to Kumin's metaphysics, for she transforms her ghosts into clearer, living beings, thereby reclaiming her lost.

Transforming loss into reclamation, nothingness into awakening, requires insight--the next step in the quest progression. Kumin's insight is that she retains the richness of relationships through metaphor, as the title poem of The Retrieval System makes clear: "Fact: it is people who fade, / it is animals that retrieve them." (p. 1) This realization--a metaphor hinting at the numerous methods of reclamation--is akin to a mystical experience for Kumin, which mystical experience leads to new naming; thereby, Christ's pattern of spiritual quest--nothingness, awakening, insight, new naming--reaches fruition. Kumin becomes awakened to her grounding in "the powers of being through the mystical experience of recognizing possibilities of reparation."⁵

Through Kumin's emphasis on the particular--building detail on detail--she reconstructs not just the memories of those who have been taken from her, but--in a sense--the individuals themselves. Richard Jackson summarizes Kumin's

⁴ Meek, 83.

⁵ Christ, Diving Deep..., 19.

metaphysical stance and the importance of retrieval in her poetry, terming her vision one

that balances the necessary and the incidental, the doomed lives we live against the possible miracles we witness--an exotics of mortality. 'It is true, Martin Heidegger, as you have written, / I fear to cease,' she says in "The Envelope," and perhaps, too, she has borrowed part of the title from the philosopher. For Kumin and Heidegger, a 'retrieve' (wiederholen: repetition) is not simply a way to return to a static past by mechanical repetition, to reconstruct it, but to capture its former, lost possibilities: 'I am wanting part of my life back / so I can do it over. / So I can do it better' ('Address to the Angels'). To think of the past in terms of the possible, the exotic, is to include within one's focus a future, and so construct a coherent shape for time, a coherent system. As Roethke once wrote, 'I do not wish a sense of the past: only a sense of the continuous.' What Maxine Kumin aims to retrieve, then, is the continuity of her own self.⁶

Revealing Kumin's attempt to understand loss and to find ways of turning experiences of loss into experiences

⁶ Jackson, 99.

of continuum, the retrieval poems illustrate that the past offers possibility for the future. These poems are "above all survival poems, evoking the pain of loss and the richness of life despite pain. Beyond loss, we are reminded, much is to be saved through association and memory, recalling the best of times with those who have gone till they come nearly alive again."⁷ Kumin's retrieval poems, however, seem to transcend mere survival and to approach joy--celebration of those who are dear to her, lost or not. "The main value in her life and her poetry is preservation."⁸

Illustrating Kumin's transition from a theme of stubbornly confronting loss and angrily staving off death--sometimes being nearly overwhelmed by it--to a more reconciled position of coping with and restoring that loss in some way, these poems of reclamation are seminal in the poet's work. Summoning a new-found tenacity through these poems, the poet realizes that "she has the strength to reach within herself and bring back life.... She examines the essence of death and rejoices in the life that's left behind."⁹ Beyond simply accepting the life that remains however, Kumin seeks to restore her lost ones.

⁷ Rev. of The Retrieval System, by Maxine Kumin, Choice Nov. 1978: 1217.

⁸ Estess, 99.

⁹ Rev. of The Retrieval System, by Maxine Kumin, Booklist 1 Sept. 1978: 19.

Consequently, her retrieval poems focus on death and loss as transformations rather than as ends in and of themselves.

Ranging from restoring one's lost through memories, dreams, and home movies, to viewing life as a continuum, Kumin's methods of reclamation take many forms. Through metaphor, the poet exacts a "latent metamorphosis, an exchange of identities: it is this exchange, in what Heidegger calls a 'leaping over,' that grounds the poetic world in the most elemental, finite terms.... This ability to both gather and transform, latent in all Kumin's metaphors, provides the basis of a successful retrieve."¹⁰ The metaphoric implementation of retrieval manifests itself throughout Kumin's work, whether it be through experiences or through animals. In a 1980 interview with Shelly Armitage, Kumin insisted, "the lives of animals we love remind us of others. Not necessarily just the faces...but the actions, the personalities, so that they almost seem to be lost people reborn."¹¹

The process of metaphor that leads to retrieval allows details/images/symbols to be amalgamated into embodiments of her lost. Through her poetry--the only "religion" to which Kumin states fealty¹²--she is able to breathe life

¹⁰ Jackson, 100.

¹¹ Armitage, 50.

¹² "An Interview at Interlochen," 42.

into the missing. Whichever the implementation, retrieval of loss is a positive response to its inevitable pain. To heal, one must accept loss, weaving together the raw ends of pain: "I will braid up the absent ones like onions. / The missing I will wrap like green tomatoes. / I will split seventy logs for winter, / seven times seven times seven" (HBFG, 19, "The Absent Ones"). Even the words in this excerpt seem "braided" together; the repetition of the "s," the "i," and the "w" sounds throughout links the words, indicative perhaps of the poet's re-established connections with the lost. With her matter-of-fact tone, the persona implies that she will repair her losses as easily or handily as she accomplishes household chores--"wrapping" green tomatoes that are not yet ripe, "splitting logs." Preparing for winter--death--she recalls the love of those who are lost to her; their memories offer her courage in the face of her own inevitable mortality. Additionally, the repetition of the line "seven times seven times seven," with its biblical overtones, underscores the continuity of life toward which the persona directs her efforts; these words also imply the timelessness and inevitability of fate, against which human struggle is useless.

Falling primarily into three categories, Kumin's retrieval poems appear throughout her work, functioning in her later books especially as counterpoint to everpresent loss. First, there are those poems which offer hope for restoration through "parallel" realities, such as dreams,

nightmares, and memories. These poems illustrate the poet's conception of loss as existing on one level while retrieval exists on another level. The wakeful poet, for example, considers the full measure of her loss, while her dreaming counterpart is able--in her dreams--to reclaim those who are lost to her. Second, some of Kumin's retrieval poems are tribal; in them she looks for hope of reclamation in the continuity and continuum of the family. Seeing herself as part of a continuum, rather than as an isolated, entirely separate human being allows Kumin to interpret loss as a matter of transition from one life-stage to another. Third, and finally, a number of her retrieval poems focus on nature as a way to observe cyclic changes and as a means by which to recognize that death can give rise to life.

Each of these three categories of retrieval poems demonstrates that loss can not only be vanquished, but also can function as an enrichment for life--in overcoming loss, one gains much. This chapter will examine these three categories of reclamation poems, and in so doing will trace the poet's evolution from anger at her losses to an acceptance of death to the discovery of renewal.

I. Many of Kumin's poems describe parallel realities--realities that mirror the insidious other side of loss--so that memories or dreams can be ways of retrieving loss.

Kumin recognizes her interest in "the dark underside of life [that] fascinated and indeed impaled [her] as a child, where innocence seemed so often to be shadowed by its twin, depravity.... The special fascination of this dark underside is precisely the absence of any kind of touchstone in it--the atmosphere of the nightmare of death, without the particulars. A terror looked for but unfound."¹³ Appearing particularly as one grows older, losing family and friends to death, this malevolence of loss requires a counterbalance to offset it so that the loss does not overwhelm. Thinking of the world as comprised of parallel realities is one way to offset the malevolent underside and to return a semblance of control to the bereaved. One experiences an initial loss of innocence--an initial realization of the malevolent underside occurs--as one becomes cognizant of death, and such losses continue for a life-time.

"July, Against Hunger" (RS, 59) illustrates a double reality as the poet forks hay and performs other farm chores while memories intrude. Kumin's recollections of her father are so vivid that they seem to bring him back into her present life and the immediate landscape:

Loneliness fills me like a pitcher.

The old deaths dribble out. My father clucks
his tongue, disapproving of manual labor.

¹³ Elson, 9.

I swivel to catch his eye, he ducks
 behind the tractor, his gray fedora
 melts into this year's colt munching grain.
 Meanwhile, a new life kicks in the mare.
 Meanwhile, the poised sky opens on rain.

While Kumin considers herself securely fixed in the "now" of time, she also recognizes the dual realities on either side of now: past and future, so that "The time on either side of now stands fast / glinting like jagged window glass." Feeling her losses very keenly, she is consumed by loneliness--seemingly filled to overflowing. The poet terms herself a pitcher, an object--wanting to be non-sentient in the presence of such pain--and she swivels as if a machine to catch her father's eye; he seems to fly by, evading her. Forking the hay against the impending storm, "the smell collects, elusive, sweet," and the poet is overcome by fatigue and grief: "There are limits, my God, to what I can heft / in this heat!" Allusive of Sexton, Kumin anticipates "the Great Rat"--her own, inevitable death, eventually finding symbolic reassurance (though despair remains) in the mare's pregnancy; death leads to life--specifically, good can arise from her father's death. Death must occur so that life can continue. The mare's pregnancy comforts Kumin after her father's death because the impending colt becomes a metaphoric embodiment of her father's spirit: animals retrieve people. Furthermore, life-cycles and continuity are underscored by Kumin's

terming the colt "this year's colt": transience is an inescapable part of life. Next year another colt will take this one's place, and life will continue. In the poet's remembering her father, he continues to live after a fashion. The parallel reality which she fabricates offsets--at least at times--the loss which weaves through her life.

Reclaimed in the parallel reality of the dream, the reality of the past exists before the loss. This reality can be a preferable one because the dreamer can retrieve her loss, can have the lost one present in the here and now of the dream. Dreams can function as an antidote to waking loss. For example, the poet is able to recoup her now-dead best friend, Anne Sexton:

when the phone rings in my sleep
and I answer, a dream-cigarette in my hand,
it is always the same. We are back at our posts,
hanging around like boxers in
our old flannel bathrobes...

(GT, 22, "Itinerary of an Obsession")

Unhappy at being deserted in such an unjust and untimely fashion--"the middle age you wouldn't wait / for now falls on me" (RS, 15, "Progress Report")--Kumin regains her friend through her dreams; although Sexton "hasn't changed" (GT, 22, "Itinerary of an Obsession"), in Kumin's dreams she perpetually lives through middle age: "Imagine it! Did you think you could escape?" The persona complains: "You

haven't changed. / I, on the other hand, am forced to grow older." Additionally, the wakeful Kumin realizes: "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" (RS, 48, "Splitting Wood at Six Above"). More than a poet's recreating her best friend, this is dialogue--Kumin is conversing with her friend. Sexton calls from the other side of life while Kumin answers her also in some "other" side, a dream consciousness. The poet chooses the reality of retrieval here, realizing that "on both sides of the tissue / the dreamer walks into the weather / past time..." (UC, 25, "The Dreamer, the Dream"). For Kumin, reality is a continuum existing on simultaneous levels--levels of loss and levels of retrieval. Both realities continue so that: "After the sleeper has burst his night pod / climbed up out of its silky holdings / the dream must stumble alone now / must mope in the hard eye of morning." From chrysalis to butterfly, the sleeper bursts the cocoon and emerges; the dream causes a transformation and growth--even in the sobering context of loss. On the other side of wakefulness the dream continues: "all this they do in secret / climbing behind his back / lumbering up from their dark fissure / going up like a dream going on." The dream persists as the dream-creatures persevere in their parallel reality even after the dreamer awakens.

But the sleeper has both dreams and nightmares. If

the reality of the sleeper is a wanted reality of retrieval, it can also be an unwanted reality of nightmares at times. In the sleeping reality, Kumin notes, she is at times "working out / among the bad old dreams" (RS, 68, "A Mortal Day of No Surprises"). Some dreams/nightmares force her to relive her losses/death/pain ad infinitum: loss is inescapable. These bad dreams must be reckoned with time after time, as "The Nightmare Factory" (NF, 93) makes plain. The underside, as revealed in the nightmare, takes the form of "dream machines":

these are the dream machines
 the dream machines
 they put black ants in your bed
 silverfish in your ears
 they raise your father's corpse
 they stick his bones in your sleep
 or his stem or all thirty-six
 of his stainless steel teeth
 they line them up
 like the best orchestra seats

The repetition of words and phrases functions as a chant detailing impending death: "The forecast is nothing but trouble. / It will snow fiercely enough to fill all these open graves" (RS, 2, "The Retrieval System"). The dream machines surround the sleeper with insects, symbolizing the decay to occur after death as maggots and other pestilences worry the corpse. Kumin's driving, Sextonian tone here

adds to the repetition to create the presence of a doomsday machine that, like an "assembly-line," tortures the sleeper. Contrary to many other images of her father, this representation of him is most unwelcome; here, he is reduced to an object. His human qualities are gone, and only his corpse, bones, stem, and teeth remain to torment the poet. Personified, these nightmares are "nazis and cossacks... / klansmen and judases," all manner of evil. The lines "if i should die before / if i should die"--part of a child's bedtime prayer--underscore the helplessness one feels in the presence of such evil. Kumin's use of the lower-case "i" enhances the child-like belief revealed in the prayer and the childishness in thinking that there is escape from depravity. Again, the repetition lends a sinister tone to the poem, especially as Kumin ends the second line, "if i should die," with the word die, implying its inevitability. Furthermore, the lack of punctuation throughout the poem hastens the reading, adding to the incantatory effect of the repetition. The final line of the poem--"wait the undreamt of"--is also without punctuation, suggesting that the process of the poem will continue into infinity, a feeling enhanced by the fact that Kumin ends the poem with a dangling participle: the poem seems to continue on another plane.

Most of Kumin's poetry, however, presents the recognition of dual realities as a method of reclaiming that which has been lost, and is, therefore, an embracing

of the idea of retrieval. One such obvious method of reparation is that of memories. If it is possible to rectify one's loss through memories, replaying an experience and therefore living it anew, then that which was lost remains lost on only one level. The poet evokes a memory, a parallel reality as she eats "wild red raspberries / still warm from the sun / and smelling faintly of jewelweed / in memory of my father" (LA, 9, "Appetite"). Again, a physical act beckons the image of her father "tucking the napkin / under his chin and bending / over an ironstone bowl...." Her one act of eating raspberries evokes the recollection of her father actually constructed of many such single incidents:

my father
 with the sigh of a man
 who has seen all and has been redeemed
 said time after time
 as he lifted his spoon

men kill for this.

Memories reverse other losses as well, as recollections of childhood, for example, allow the poet to reclaim briefly a lost innocence, before knowing the "dangerous lore of / the grownups" (P, 7, "The Habits of Childhood"). Kumin recalls the time of simplicity in this poem, "remembering how [she] hid where children hide." Perhaps what is actually referred to here is hiding in

naivete, holding out against those losses of innocence to come:

And 'All--ee--all--ee--in--free!' they called
then

While parents called from porches, and the night
Fell up the summer sky where I sat tight
In the skin of my secret, last out, when,
Eyes shut behind my fingers, I could sense
The seekers, come to find out my defense.

The game of hide and seek becomes a metaphor for the child's attempts to resist the inevitability of growing up--against the forces that actively seek to lead her through a transition into guilt. Memories conjure up the prelapsarian state of the innocent child, the world when "mothers turn[ed] the lids of blankets down," and "bath water chuckle[d]," a world as yet little touched by loss. Kumin's language reinforces the idea of youth. "The night fell up the summer sky," for example, is an odd phrasing. Aligned with growing up, the word up in this context foreshadows coming losses of innocence. The sky she describes is a summer sky, implying youth, and dispels the night, approaching death.

Memories of childhood are also invoked in "The Hermit Celebrates the Basswood Tree" (UC, 10), in which the hermit addresses the tree, his "Lady," and in so doing notes the sounds, smells, and sights of his youth. The tree "smell[s] like a shopgirl / doused with rose water," sounds

like a "furnace of bees,' and has "a white ruff / thicker than Queen Elizabeth's." Returning the hermit to the time of his youth, as sensory appeals so often can, these persuasions of the senses convince him for a time that he is: "eight in short pants / come with my uncle for / a skyride over Atlantic City." The basswood tree evokes the hermit's memory of the "skyride," a time of excitement and innocence. In remembering the "skyride," the adult hermit relives the reality of his childhood. Speaking to the "spirit" of the tree, the hermit recalls:

You send me down
the dime-store sweetness
of your crowded white bells.
In that way the air sang.
I buried my nose in
cotton candy and was
licked clean with a handkerchief.
Lady.

The memories called up by the basswood tree are of a time when the hermit was connected to other people (his uncle, and others) and perhaps was innocent of the adult human traits which would drive him to seek solitude. As the hermit accepts the memories evoked by the basswood tree, he also embraces another reality, reliving his childhood, the time before his loss of innocence. The indulgent, maternal image of the "Lady," the tree, is contrasted with the images of childhood and youth, "early / apple green grass,"

"cotton candy," "the dime-store sweetness"--a kid in a candy store. These images, as well as the other images of fecundity and childhood, underscore the hermit's rejuvenation/return to the attitude of childhood as he encounters the tree.

Another type of parallel reality occurs as the poet realizes that what she perceives as loss for a blind friend (the loss of sight) has been transmuted so that reality now is simply different for the friend than it is for the poet. The loss of sight has been overcome as the blind friend learns to "see" through braille. Recognizing to her surprise that her blind friend can see what she herself cannot the poet achieves a new understanding. Her world becomes one of synesthetic reversal: "my eyes see stubble on a page. / Your touch informs your sense" (H, 22, "To a Blind Friend Teaching Me Braille"). Seeing, synonymous with understanding, fails the poet for the first time as she recognizes that she literally sees, but does not understand, the braille. Shocked, the persona exclaims:

How treacherous my vision is
 Before your boundary mark!
 In the room where the lamp is lit
 Only against my dark
 I cannot cross your parapet,
 Except you govern me
 And quicken my dumb fingertips
 With yours that see.

Kumin's reversal here makes clear the unexpected irony--that vision can be treacherous. In depicting this contradiction, the poet reinforces her surprise at not comprehending that which a blind person easily understands. There are two realities here, two ways of seeing, so that the blind friend must lead the sighted one--the blind leading the blind, if you will. Kumin recognizes that her blind friend has become able to retrieve her sight, in a sense; they live simultaneously in different realities.

Creating a different type of parallel reality as she wears the clothes of Anne Sexton, her dead friend, Kumin brings to mind the adage of walking in someone else's shoes. In the process, the poet feels closer to her friend:

Shall I say how it is in your clothes?

A month after your death I wear your blue jacket.

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

.

My skin presses your old outline.

It is hot and dry inside.

(RS, 46, "How It Is")

Wearing Sexton's clothes, Kumin presents two realities to the dog: he sees Kumin and smells Sexton's scent. Wanting to shed the pain the clothes evoke, like a snake shedding its skin, Kumin is uncomfortable in these "hot," "dry" trappings. Her skin presses Sexton's old outline,

signifying that Sexton's presence will continue with her: her poetry will be perpetually compared to and analyzed according to Sexton's; critics and biographers will come to her seeking information on Sexton ad nauseam: "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." Kumin "will be years" recreating their relationship; the gerunds "gathering," "fishing," and "leaning" emphasize the continuation of movement of the relationship, of the responsibility, though it is now one-sided. Sybil Estess provides this evaluation of "How It Is":

'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.¹⁴

The friendship continues in a reality parallel to the one in which it existed when Sexton was living in that there are more communications, more words, more memories to be gathered up and recalled, whether it be through the wearing

¹⁴ Estess, 101.

of Sexton's clothes or shoes (GT, 22, "Itinerary of an Obsession") or through other means of retrieval.

Films--both home and commercial movies--preserve and continually replay one type of reality, proceeding as they do through a measured space of time and re-enacting that time whenever the film is rewound and played again; several of Kumin's poems contain particularly important cinematic images.¹⁵ "Casablanca" (H, 45) places the famous film of that name in counterpoint with other realities. There is the reality of the film, played over and over again and never changing; there is the reality of the "real" boy killed in a "real" war; there is the reality of the "real" Humphrey Bogart, "lately dead / of cancer..."; and there is the reality experienced by the poet as she examines the contrasts between these competing realities. As the poet remembers the boy, she also recalls the film: "As years unwind now reels unwind." The myths of film-reality become evident as the larger-than-life characters--the mythic human beings created by Bogart and Bergman--play on the screen once again: "Gray springs out of the hair, / cheeks refill, and eyelids lighten. / Bogie, beautifully indifferent, / seduces a cigarette and womankind." The magic of the cinema presents an image of life that

¹⁵ Fialkowski comments that "Kumin's poems happen in the present tense. Even history occurs now.... There is no past in cinema. Events have the authority of Now. Kumin speaks of this presence as if possessed by it, telling becomes her mission." (pp. 109-110)

contrasts with Humphrey Bogart in real life: in the film Bogart is immortal, is retrieved whenever the film is played: in reality he is dead.

Musing on the myths of Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman, and comparing these mythic figures with the real-life human beings, Kumin remembers "a boy with sandy hair / could do the dialogue all blurry." Replaying the film mentally, the poet also replays the memory of this boy, contrasting him with the film and its mythologized war:

cigarette dangling, cheeks sucked hollow,
hands in his jacket pockets,
[he] could do the dialogue
for drinks at any party;
went down with his destroyer, swallowed

in the other half of that real war.

This boy, himself able to recreate the dialogue of the film, becomes almost intertwined with the film for the poet so that as she recalls the movie, she remembers him as well. Curiously, though the boy was a real human being--as opposed to a cinematic character--he achieves a sort of immortality as Kumin writes of him, rescuing him from the destroyer, bringing him back to life. Eventually, though, the film, the memory, the retrieval have to end so that "time goes west / and we come back to where we really are." We come back to reality--one kind of reality at any rate.

Watching home movies brings back the lost as well. Home movies not only retrieve one's relatives, but they also function to show one's position within a family, within a continuum. In "The Deaths of the Uncles" (HBFG, 13) Kumin relives her uncles, reinstating their young adulthood, their prime: "swatting / the shuttlecock's white tit." From this image of her uncles in the full bloom of their sexuality and active youth, Kumin moves to a speculation that they are, at this point in their lives, as shown in the home movies, "innocent of their deaths." Watching their lives unfold, in retrospect, the poet writes of their fates as foregone conclusions. Now mythic figures and images, her uncles are retrieved, whenever Kumin watches the home movies. While viewing the films, she lays out the rest of their lives as if telling the plot of a movie. Providing as it does a broad overview so that the poet, in a sense, becomes the camera, recording the family history, her perspective is a particularly interesting one. Other cinematic characters come to mind, for example, as she recalls her seven uncles, watching their images appear on the screen: "How full of family feeling they are, their seven / bald heads coming back as shiny as an infection, / coming back to testify like Charlie Chaplin, / falling down a lot like Laurel and Hardy." Aligned with buffoons from slapstick movies, the uncles have become larger than life. In comparing them with professional fools, Kumin implies that the human condition and the notion of hope are

particularly contemptible/laughable. Death is with them here in the full-bloom of their youth, as their bald heads become "shiny as an infection," and foreshadow impending death. The balance of their lives is played out as the poet traces the collective histories: "O run the film forward past Lawrence the baby, / the masterpiece, handsomest, favorite issue. / Cover the screen while the hats at his funeral / bob past like sailboats, like black iron cooking pots." Even the baby of the family grows old and dies, and the fates of the other uncles are variations on the same theme. But the poet gets them back, in part, through the home movies.

People can also be immortalized through paintings. Several of Kumin's poems treat this method of retrieval and illustrate the way in which both visual and verbal art immortalize human beings. "Gardner Museum" (H, 66) describes John Singer Sargent's painting of Isabella Gardner: "Three times and places Sargent painted her, / the hair cropped, the high-placed bones shimmering / through the skull, and the hands nervous, demanding." The painter captured this remarkable woman:

She was diamond hard and sure, the stuff
museums are made of. Everything endures:
the buttressed will, supportable forever
by bankers and solid sons; the leather room,
.
That was the grip on life she had, the wide

underlips, the ordaining jaw fastened on
main things, vain about dying...

Kumin's description of this painting is one that evokes not just the painting, but also the woman who was painted. Here is a woman who was so intensely tied to life that she continues to live on: this woman seems to have been strong enough to escape her very death. And a parallel reality is also developed: the poet captures in words what the painter recorded on canvas, as all the while Isabella Gardner, "diamond hard and sure," endures. She is timeless thanks to Sargent and to Kumin, but also, somehow, in spite of them.¹⁶

By creating poetic portraits, a poet immortalizes and recovers her lost ones, thereby creating a parallel reality as they live again through her writing. Those people about whom Kumin writes achieve a mythic, larger-than-life status through their transformation into images. One of poetry's functions--that of evoking images--can be turned to the task of retrieval so that the poet reclaims her loss as she writes of it. For within the context of the poem time is stopped and manipulated at the poet's discretion. The physically dead live on spiritually through poetry; while the body decays, the images to which the lost have been transformed will not become sullied. Poetry, literature,

¹⁶ A number of other poets have written about paintings as well, among them William Carlos Williams and W.H. Auden, who treat Breughal's paintings.

is an ultimate retrieval, the creation of an additional reality.

II. Kumin's self-described tribal poems comprise a second category of her retrieval poetry. Kumin defines these poems as concerning "kinship and parenting,"¹⁷ as well as "family and familial relationships."¹⁸ She emphasizes her "strong sense of tribe and ancestor, an ancestor worship or desire to find out about [her] roots.... If you have Eastern European roots as [she does], and if you are a product of immigrant grandparents or great grandparents who left the Old World behind, you have a chronic sense of unfulfillment."¹⁹ In an interview with Martha George Meek, Kumin stressed "the family element, the saving nature of the close associations that you can feel within the family or, by extension, within the family of writers, plus a few close, tried-and-true friends."²⁰ Kumin's immediate family--parents, siblings, husband, children--and their love enables the poet to stave off death. Her sense of ancestry gives her a perception of

¹⁷ "Kumin on Kumin: The Tribal Poems," by Maxine Kumin, in To Make A Prairie, by Maxine Kumin, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1979.

¹⁸ Hammond, 48.

¹⁹ Hammond, 48.

²⁰ Meek, 20.

connectedness, of continuity, of identity. Exceedingly important to the poet (by virtue of the fact that they appear throughout the canon of her work), and offering a unique insight into her philosophy, the tribal poems are truly poems of retrieval.

The tribe symbolizes continuity for Kumin; she derives much comfort from tracing her ancestry and from identifying her place within that family structure. Seeing her family as a continuum offers hope for retrieval in that the poet can define herself as a link in the familial chain, with others preceding and following her own individual link. "Sperm" (HBFG, 9) describes this continuum, as the poet writes of her grandfather and her cousins:

You have to admire the workmanship of cousins.

There is a look in our eyes.

Once we were all seventeen of us naked as almonds.

We were all suckled except for Richard

who had to be raised on a glue of bananas.

Now he is bald and breathes through the nose

like an air conditioner...

Kumin's tone here is particularly interesting. The cousins seem to have been crafted by factory workers who took the raw material of the young relatives--"naked as almonds"--and produced air conditioners and other products. The poet's terminology, "suckled" and "raised on a glue of bananas," also implies a kind of impersonal, master

breeding program; Kumin could as easily be describing methods of raising lambs, goats, or horses. These two kinds of imagery combine to create the impression of a driving force, a continuum of power and direction, which is larger than the individuals involved.

Kumin's perception of this continuity is reinforced by her acknowledgement that "here, in the next generation," she continues the family. The poet's tone and phrasing, as well as her use of the present tense, imply periods of time that occur concurrently; it is as if she is in a multi-screen theatre which is playing different movies on its various screens. In describing similarities to her cousins, the poet portrays her feeling of connection as well as a feeling of inevitability: even the baby of the family will grow old, perhaps--incongruously--even becoming bald again:

O grandfather, what is it saying,
 these seventeen cousins german
 descending the same number of steps
 their genes like innocent porters
 a milk churn of spermatozoa?
 You have to admire the product...

Like an omniscient narrator, the poet describes her kin from a seemingly-objective perspective, making obvious the pre-ordained plan. What will happen to the family is a foregone conclusion:

I 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.

Time seems to move back and forth here, from childhood to adulthood, as if one act naturally follows another, as if Teddy's "plane goes down in the Aleutians" directly after he is caught "playing games...with Clara," and perhaps as an indirect result of his misbehavior. Kumin's use of the present tense is important here too in that it gives the impression of watching a home movie in which her relatives have been relegated to images on a reel. Her matter-of-fact tone also lends credence to the concept of the family as a foregone conclusion.

Retrieval of loss also occurs for the poet as she recognizes and feels her connections to other people. Her existential loneliness is tempered by the special links to others. Consequently, the poet's sense of ancestry, of understanding her history within her family line and as a Jew, is crucial to her sense of connectedness. "For My Great-Grandfather: A Message Long Overdue" (NF, 51) tells of Kumin's great-grandfather, "Rosenberg the tailor." The poet is able to have a sense of her grandfather as a living, breathing human being through a three-page letter

he wrote to his daughter in 1895. From this letter the poet fleshes out her ancestor so that these scant pages recreate the man. Again, the poet's use of the present tense in this poem adds to the impression of a living being--it is as if Kumin is conversing with this long-dead relative. As she reads of him and then tells him to her children, the poet's great-grandfather becomes recreated and lives on. Welcoming him, as well, the poet further adds to the portrait of this man as a still-living human being. She is richer and more connected because of him:

I tell you to my children, who forget,
are brimful of themselves, and anyway
might have preferred a farmer or a sailor,
but you and I are buttoned, flap to pocket.
Welcome, ancestor, Rosenberg the Tailor!
I choose to be a lifetime in your debt.

Another poem that illustrates the poet's sense of history, and of Jewishness, is "For Anne at Passover" (H, 100). This poem is set in "cold Easter week," placing the Christian holiday in counterpoint to Passover, making the poet mindful of her ancestry: "Tonight, the damask cloth laid, the loving cup / brimmed with sweet wine, I think of those my kin / who sat that Friday, inviting Elijah in / and swore he never came, nor comes again." The poet places herself within Judaism. In this season of corresponding holidays, she contrasts Anne's Christian tenets with her own Jewish beliefs:

and mine to mind another book: remind
 my blood relations we are marked in the blood
 of an earlier lamb, and call God good,
 who thumped our Moses so to send us out
 and turned aside and hardened Pharoah's heart
 ten times, Antagonist! to put
 us on that dusty pathway through

Your hot sea. So we come to praise you.

With the trappings of the Christian Easter all around her, the poet is reminded of her Jewish ancestry. Here too, the use of the present tense serves to reinforce immediacy, continuity, retrieval. Kumin feels her legacy and ancestry very strongly. Interestingly, the poem ends with a type of prayerful reconciliation--"So we come to praise you"--between the Christian view of God "which divide[s] Him in three parts" and the Jewish "vengeful King of pride." The result is a joint celebration: "Guests of our glands, slaves to our origins, / we pray and eat tonight in greening weather. / Time swells the buds. A sharper rain begins; / we are all babes who suck at love together." Renewal occurs as the poet recognizes her place in the continuum.

Retrieval is also depicted in the tribal poems as having a significant role in staving off death. Love offers comfort and the hope of at least a temporary refuge from death. Such love can build a life of fecundity and richness:

we will hang up our clothes and our vegetables
 we will decorate the rafters with mushrooms
 on our hearth we will burn splits of silver
 popple

we will stand up to our knees in their flicker
 the soup kettle will clang five notes of pleasure
 and love will take up quarters.

(NF, 35, "Homecoming")

The lush organic imagery adds to the harmony and warmth of the life described, the "five notes of pleasure" perhaps the poet, her husband, and three children. Additionally, the language in this segment is rich and mellifluous with the repetition of the "w" and the "l" sounds. Repeating "we will" four times and "will" alone twice more, the poet implies vow-taking; this ceremony of the home and of love is further symbolized by the image of the soup kettle, which "clangs" like a marriage bell. Although death is undeniable, there is much to appreciate in the meantime:

Write, saying this much clearly:

Nearly all, this is nearly all,
 The small sounds of growing, the impress
 Of unarrested time, raising
 The prized moment.

And this is ours.

Love moves about, opening the doors.

(H, 97, "The Moment Clearly")

Death is coming for us all, undeniably, but appreciating

each moment, each small thing as it comes, can sometimes give the illusion that "this is nearly all." The pain of knowledge of death can be surmounted as "love moves about, opening the doors," making reclamation possible.

The sense of retrieval through love is particularly keen as the poet writes of her husband. Although she also realizes her mortality through her relationship with him, she is somehow given hope and sustenance through that relationship, as revealed in "The Heron" (H, 77). Kumin confronts a heron whose "upper bill was eaten away / by pellet or disease," meaning certain and painful death for the bird:

This season he will starve to death
and the rains will steam the flesh
from his thready bones and the sand
will lace them to grain rows we lie on.
For which I turned to you
and drew your hand over me
to believe, to make us easy.

The poet is comforted as she turns to (presumably) her husband; his touch makes her "believe" in something more than death. The touch, the sexual act, holds promise of life, of renewal, so that "the wolf, the mongering wolf / who stands outside the self" at times will lie "lightly down and sle[ep]" (NF, 59). The union of the act of love provides a comfort which can make one forget about death--if only temporarily.

Retrieval through love is illustrated in "January 25th" (P, 71) as well. In the midst of winter the poet and her husband "lay back to back in bed, / two thin survivors" in a time of cold and of death:

Snow fell down the chimney, making
the forked logs spit
ashes of resurrected crickets.
By 3 A.M. both stoves were dead.
A ball of steel wool
froze to the kitchen window sill.

Death is here in the "dead stoves," the "ashes of...crickets," and in the fact that something has frozen inside the house, which is presumably the shelter. But there is hope. Perhaps Kumin's early training (belief?) in Catholicism looms as she employs Christian imagery here. The image of the "ashes of resurrected crickets" is reminiscent of biblical language--the phrase implying that death (ashes to ashes) will be overcome by resurrection. Crickets symbolize forthcoming spring/renewal/rebirth--as well as good luck, when in the house--as they thrive in spring and summer. To take the Christian iconography a bit further, 3 o'clock was the hour at which Christ was taken down from the cross and though dead, would become resurrected. And it is forked logs that spit the ashes; "forked" a term sometimes used in conjunction with the devil. Clearly the imagery in this poem suggests a warring between the forces of good and evil, life and death.

Kumin's message would seem to be that in the midst of this bleak, encroaching cold/despair/death, the poet and her husband have each other, and hence they have hope:

My love, we live at such extremes
 that when, in the leftover spite of the storm,
 we touch and grow warm,
 I can believe I saw
 the ground release
 that brown and orange commonplace
 sign of thaw.

Again the poet employs the term "believe." Love is its own theology. Their connection reminds Kumin that there is renewal, that a "thaw," spring, is coming, and in fact:

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.

There is a glimmer of retrieval here, even if it is only a glimmer at present. Through her husband's touch, the poet is put in mind of this renewal. Life is stirring "under the ice" in mud twelve layers deep (reminiscent of the twelve apostles)--there is hope.

In addition to the sense of retrieval which the poet gleans from her husband and from their intimate unity she also has a sense of continuity through her children. Through her progeny part of the poet will live on. "Our

Ground Time Here Will Be Brief," (GT, 3) the title poem of Kumin's seventh collection, depicts the poet waiting as the plane on which she is a passenger takes on "the mail, quick freight, / trays of laboratory mice, / coffee and Danish for / the passengers." But the title also refers to the fact that none of us will be living on earth endlessly. Contemplating her death, Kumin also considers the possibility of continuity:

On the cloud-pack above, strewn
as loosely as parsnip
or celery seeds, lie
the souls of the unborn:

my children's children's
children...

The chain will continue and the poet will live on through her connections to her children. The poem "Grandchild" (LA, 12) shows this continuity to be already made manifest as Kumin writes of her daughter's child.

Family features passed down genetically through generations clearly show the continuity and retrieval which children make possible. Kumin observes that she and her cousins, for example, "all wear [her grandfather's] hooded eyes" (HBFG, 9, "Sperm"). This physical feature symbolizes the life passed on from one generation to the next. The family connection is obvious also as she looks at a photo of her brother and herself:

ages four and six

propped in matching sailor suits
 against a railing on the Boardwalk,
 both wearing the family lower lip,
 the family shock of hair.

(GT, 27, "The Incest Dream")

Describing these features almost as if part of a costume, the poet sees these similarities of features in her own children as well. The grown children return, "adult, professional, aloof" (GT, 18, "Family Reunion"). Though they are grown and therefore lost, in part, to the parents, they are reclaimed when they come to visit, at which time the connections between parents and children become obvious: "Wearing our gestures, how wise you grow, / ballooning to overfill our space, / the almost-parents of your parents now." The parents are to be continued by and through the children, who even "wear their gestures." When one sees that something of oneself continues, an easing of loneliness, however small, can take place.

Retrieval and ancestry are themes which are found in poems about other relatives as well: father, grandfather, grandmother, and brother. Many poems, in particular, concern the poet's father, several of which have been discussed elsewhere. The poet's relationship with her father--as revealed in the poems--was an important one, beyond the usual importance of a father/daughter relationship. He was the father she continually tried to

please, and with whom she shared a love which they both hid. Her involvement with and accomplishments in dressage are all so that she might favorably move her father, gain his love:

All this for the fantasy daddy
 that princely blackboot
 when in fact the bona fide father
 hunkered over his bourbon
 and never went out of doors
 except to dry out on the cure
 or begin again with AA
 on Coke and straight water
 and kept his indifferent eyes away
 from his wishbone of a daughter.

(HBFG, 70, "The Horsewoman")

Evident here is the daughter's longing for her father's approval and love, a longing which is recreated and immortalized as the poet commits the experience and the pain to paper; she is a "wishbone of a daughter," who wishes things were different. Her father is such an important force in her life that he is with her, and she will, in a sense, continually seek his approval: she has internalized him. He is reclaimed in her thoughts and in her dreams, popping up unexpectedly: "Last night my color-blind chainsmoking father / who has been dead for fourteen years / stepped up out of a basement tie shop / downtown and did not recognize me" (RS, 10, "My Father's Neckties").

Dreaming of him, she recalls the father of her girlhood, "a time of / ugly ties and acrimony." And although it was a time of "acrimony," there was "a window / opening on an interior we both knew / where we had loved each other, keeping it quiet." Through her dreams she retrieves her father and his love. The sense of her father as a still vital force and a continuing presence in her life is strong.

The persona's father offers comfort when other sources fail her. While making love to her husband--usually a sustaining and nourishing act--the poet becomes frightened anew at her own mortality:

the small hot apprehension
of my death is folded in me
each time you enter my body.

Even while we hold each other
rising more surely than hornflies
to beat against the ceiling
Death tags along like a Saint Bernard
padding across his own night-alp.

(GT, 14, "Spending the Night")

In this instance the succor usually derived from the connection to and closeness with her husband does not occur. The poet feels closer to death because she has not been soothed. So she thinks of her father, turning to him for reassurance: "Afterward I dial the grave. / My father

speaks, his voice / is thin yet clear as lightning forks. / Stay home! No visitors! he calls." In this "response" from her father, the poet finds the wherewithal to realize that "snatched out, held down, this one / time more I pass [the Spoiler] in the dark." In part because of her father's injunction to return to the living, Kumin has been consoled.

Kumin's belief in her father's continuity becomes clear in "Introducing the Fathers" (LA, 8). She and her friend incorporate their fathers, both of whom are deceased, into their friendship, so that:

We open a friendship between them, sweetly
posthumous,
and watch them bulge out twirling Malacca canes
into the simple feature of straight losses,
still matching net worths, winning big at
blackjack,

our golden warriors rising toward the Big Crash.

It is as if the fathers are living, and indeed, in one sense they are as the daughters carry them forth. This fantasy friendship

is underscored by the depiction of the fathers as glamorous high rollers, "golden warriors." The two friends remain connected to their fathers, still operating in a continuum between the fathers and daughters.

Among the other family members who find their way into Kumin's poetry--illustrating family connections and

context--is her grandmother. Despite Kumin's professed belief in the matrilineage of her family and in the importance of the female, her grandmother does not often appear in Kumin's poetry; poems about her male progenitors--such as her great-grandfather, elsewhere discussed--are more frequent. In my interview with her, Kumin stated that she wrote little about her grandmother because she knew so little about her. Information about her grandfather was more plentiful. But it is evident that, despite her infrequent appearance, Kumin's grandmother lives on through the poet:

I remember my father's mother boiled
 chicken with their feet on, and we ate,
 blasphemous modern children, from her plate
 both meat and milk and stayed up loved and late,
 no letter law applying to a child.

I have sealed her in me, her fierce love
 of kindred all she had to give,
 and my drowned Polish ancestry,
 washed out of Europe, rises up in me.

(H, 104, "For Anne At Passover")

An integral part of Kumin's life, her indulgent, fierce grandmother lives on through the poet. Kumin's grandmother reinforces the poet's sense of the tribal, as the poet recalls her connections to other people--as Jew, as descendent, and more specifically, as granddaughter. "Washed out of Europe," their culture "drowned" in the trip

across the ocean to a new homogeneous land, Kumin's ancestors--their richness, traditions, love, pride--resurface in the poet.

Kumin realizes another type of richness as she writes of her Great aunt Manya--an eccentric free-spirit who was the tender-hearted rescuer of animals. In "Caring: A Dream" (LA, 17) she lovingly describes this relative who has left her such a fecund legacy:

Greataunt Manya of the monkey

dirt under her fingernails

gray hairs flying out of her bun

and Beppo on her shoulder

comes back to me in primary colors

.

every wet tramp starved dog

mauled chipmunk Manya saved

deserved deserved

This great aunt (probably of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, given Kumin's own date of birth) must have been a stark contrast to the models women were to follow at that time, she of unkempt appearance, the champion of stray and mistreated animals. Kumin addresses this great aunt, "O Manya," with something akin to reverence. In a world of fading values and colors, Manya returns in "primary

colors," signifying the richness she adds to Kumin's heritage, as well as the saving richness of Kumin's memory. The poet feels a strong connection to her aunt who saved animals and people alike, the poet pronouncing such retrieval "seamless," "nor is it one thing to save animals / and people another / but seamless." From this great aunt Kumin incorporates a model for retrieval and the aunt returns to Kumin: "framed in this dream / by the shuffle of the doomed / to command me to go on."

A final relative to be discussed here (although there are others in Kumin's poems) is the poet's deceased brother, killed in early adulthood by amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, Lou Gehrig's disease. Although Kumin felt his loss very keenly, he must also be included in this tribal section because of his fortitude in enduring debilitation and death; his courage gives the poet sustenance. Her brother returns to Kumin in her dreams: "tonight he strides in rosy-cheeked / and eighteen" (GT, 26, "The Unfinished Story"). But he is also carried forth in the poet's memory as she recalls his bravery as he goes to swim:

Even close to the end
 when nothing works except one hand
 my brother goes to the Special Cases pool
 where cheerful athletes reposition
 his puppet bones in a canvas sling
 scoot him down the ramp
 into tepid water

adjust his flotation collar
and cut him loose.

(GT, 28, "Out-of-the-Body Travel")

Even as he relinquishes most control of his body and nears death from this "disease that wastes the large muscles," (GT, 26, "The Unfinished Story") her brother tolerates helplessly what to many others would be humiliating and undignified: he goes, a "special case," to the pool to bob around, like a marionette, held up by flotation devices, yet afforded the luxury of what little movement one hand in the water can provide--a lot more than on land, but not very much, after all. Despite these losses--limb by limb, muscle by muscle--of movement, her brother remains somehow miraculously cheerful, a cheerfulness reinforced by Kumin's tone in this poem: "Speech has left him, but not joy. / I carry that grin / that broad important self-pleasured wink / with me into that April day" (GT, 28, "Out-of-the-Body Travel")--into Spring, into renewal; applied to Kumin's brother, the label "special" clearly has positive as well as negative connotations. He offers hope for rejuvenation and for courage in facing the grimmest of circumstances. Enriched and strengthened by the memory of her brother, Kumin remembers him with more than just pain, with joy.

In addition to considering the manner in which Kumin's poems are peopled, it is also valuable to explore the

metaphoric ways that her loved ones are retrieved. They are returned to her in many different ways, including those of parallel realities--memories, dreams, nightmares. The lost are also reclaimed through such means as phone calls, tape recordings, letters, and photographs.

Alone at her farm with only animals for company, the poet is disengaged from her husband during a blizzard so that he is temporarily lost to her. She "sleep[s] in [his] empty space / as simply as a child in a child's cot" (RS, 62, "Notes on a Blizzard"). All sources of outside communication are cut off, so that her separation from him, though temporary, is complete: "Wednesday, the phone's dead." Her husband returns in dreams at first: "last night you walked / barefoot into my dream." But finally they are reconnected:

It's Friday. The phone works.
 You're driving north. Your voice
 is faint, as if borne across
 clothesline and tin cans from the treehouse.
 The turkeys show up again
 flopping under the kitchen window
 like novice swimmers daring the deep end.
 Low on corn, I offer jelly beans.
 The sun comes out eventually,
 a bedded woman, one
 surprised eye open.

As her husband calls and is therefore retrieved, things

begin to return to normal, life leaves its suspended animation and goes on. Their wild turkeys, who had disappeared, return, and the sun "comes out"--a symbol of a reawakening as a "surprised," "bedded," dormant woman; although the blizzard seemed interminable, the persona realizes that it will end--the hibernation is over.

Recovery also takes place through tape recordings, as the voices of the lost are replayed. In "A Distant Grandchild Listens to Farm Sounds" (LA, 15) a child hears his grandfather's voice. Too young to understand the technology that brings his grandfather's voice: "He is waiting for Grandpa / to step out of the cassette. / The voice that sings him old MacDonald / simply precedes the body." For the child the two are one and the same. Through the magic of the tape-recording his grandfather is present, is retrieved. And for the child, the retrieval is all: his grandfather is actually present for him although he inexplicably, perhaps stubbornly, will not appear; myths begin this way:

He will ask to hear over and over
these sounds of Grandpa's devising.
The rain of his hammer, the scrape of his shovel,
the pitch of his whistle calling
the dog to his side, the horses from pasture.
The child has learned this language
while still awaiting his idol.
This is it, this nonappearance.

This is how gods are made.

Godlike, the child's grandfather creates his world through sound. Kumin's language in this poem reinforces the presence of myth; the child awaits his "idol," as if in worship. The grandchild listens to the images his grandfather has created and has become, and in so doing is able to believe that his grandfather is actually present. The cassette tape becomes his grandfather.

Through his three-page letter, all she has of him, Kumin "knows" and retrieves her own lost great-grandfather as well. Additionally, letters allow the poet reclamation of her children, all now scattered and one as far away as Europe: "daughter of the file drawer" (RS, 34, "Seeing the Bones"). "September 22nd" (P, 79), describes the restoration of one of Kumin's lost ones through letters:

There is a world of water between us
and the humpbacks of these
mink hills between us
and three months before we will speak
except in the mechanical click
that our portables make
talking on onionskin
across the Atlantic.

Kumin's images here imply that a kind of gestation has to happen before the persona regains her lost correspondent; the "world of water," an amniotic image, is strengthened by the image of the "humpbacks of these / mink hills"--round,

fecund, pregnant images. In the next three months--pregnancy is quantified into trimesters of three months each--the two will communicate only through "the mechanical click" of their portable typewriters. Although the letters are a poor substitute for the physical presence of her absent one, they are, at least, some form of retrieval. There is at minimum some kind of communication, even if on the onionskin of typewritten, air-mail letters.

Finally, retrieval of one's lost, particularly of one's family, is possible through photographs and photo albums. If a photograph is a freeze-frame of life, then people can be recouped at certain points of their lives: "The dead keep their eyes on / no one. Inside their little black wingtip stickers / they outlast us..." (P, 20, "The Album"). Ever-frozen in the poses of the living, the dead are reclaimed back into life. In the photo album for eternity is "Brother sewn into a sailor suit, / his fat hands grown round a rubber ball." Preserved like a museum specimen, his hands are "grown" around the ball, he does not merely hold it; sewn into his suit, "Brother" seems the product of a taxidermist's artistry. In the photo he will always be a living boy; the photographs are yet another way of salvaging the family.

The tribal poems are crucial to Kumin's theme of retrieval. Through reclaiming her history/ancestry/family, she becomes connected to other people and thereby has hope for restoring all manner of loss: alienation, loneliness,

separation, death. In understanding and appreciating her place within a continuum, the poet recovers those losses; the love and hope which her family offers provides the only force capable of making a stand against death, against the fear of death. The tribal poems are indeed poems of retrieval.

III. Frequent throughout her poetry and enveloping in scope, some of Kumin's nature poems are also poems of reclamation. In examining nature and the way in which it functions, the poet finds hope for renewal. While not all of her numerous nature poems focus on retrieval, a number of them do.

Reversal of loss becomes easier to understand, and more possible as well, as the poet thinks of nature as a process of life-cycles. With the regular changing of the seasons comes the understanding that though winter arrives, spring (and new life) cannot be far behind. As Kumin sees this new growth and as she renders it into imagery, she finds hope. Even the title "Relearning the Language of April" (GT, 12) suggests the continuity of renewal, for the key word in this title is not learning, but "relearning." The world is coming alive again: "Where this man walks his fences / the willows do plies with green laces, / eyelashes fly from the white plums, / the gaunt elms begin to open their frames." The gracefulness of the willows' ballet and

the increased activity of even the "gaunt elms" adds to the sense of renewal here. The language and images suggest youth, as the man is described as "lithe with morning," implying that he is young. Populated with animals, this poem evokes life and growth; in addition to the ponies, squirrels, and terriers, even "the doomed cattle" anthropomorphically wear "intelligent smiles," as if knowing that they will nourish others. "For miles around, the plowed fields / release a sweet rancidness / warm as sperm." Readied for their new crop, the fields "release a sweet rancidness," perhaps signalling something fermenting, both decomposing and giving rise to life. Certainly sperm alludes to the potential life yet to be realized, so that the combination of "rancidness" and "sperm" gives a strong sense of fecundity to the poem. Into this context of spring and growth comes the poet:

I lie in the fat lap of noon
 overhearing the doves' complaint.
 Far off, a stutter of geese raise alarm.

Once more, Body, Old Paint,
 how could you trick me like this
 in spring's blowzy arms?

Content in the "fat lap of noon" (life at its fullest, the "full noon" of the "day of life") as if in the lap of a lover, the poet is seduced back into life, into "spring's blowzy arms." As if in the act of creation/love, the poet

is tricked by her "Body," but also by "spring," into new life.

But with the promise of life and with the understanding of life-cycles comes the realization that the poet will not live forever: "When I'm scooped out of here / all things animal / and unsurprised will carry on...." Kumin's tone here is noteworthy because it is matter-of-fact, as the poem's title, "A Mortal Day of No Surprises" (RS, 68) makes clear. (Emphasis mine.) The tone evinces acceptance, rather than challenge, of death, particularly because of the implications of reincarnation:

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.

Although there's a recognition here that she will die and decay, this knowledge is tempered for the poet by the understanding that life will continue; and as she is absorbed into the ground, so she will facilitate the life-cycle as her death gives rise to new life.

In understanding that death contributes to life, the poet finds hope for retrieval of loss. Perspective is all, for example, as Kumin writes of a dead deer, "hoisted to the crossbeam and hooked tight" (P, 58, "Grudge"). What

looks like a decaying deer to her friend is venison to the poet, and thereby functions as a conundrum. One sees the dead deer as an embodiment of death, while the other finds renewal in the fact that the venison is food and therefore will sustain life:

Seeing the meat puff up to ripeness here,
 you say it rots, it's wormy, it looks black.
 Not at all. One draws, one cures a deer,
 and venison, well-hung until it reeks,
 will feed an average family for weeks.

One of Kumin's few sonnets, this poem provides a rather distasteful description of the deer--"it rots, it's wormy"--followed by an ironic and dispassionate summation of this vile thing as food--it must be hung until it reeks. The tight structure of the sonnet's form emphasizes the rigidity of different perspectives.

Even in her early loss poems--the poetry in Halfway--one finds evidence of death giving rise to life. "Homecoming" (H, 73), for example, relates the poet's journey south, leaving on the occasion of the death of a loved one:

Midway, leaves sprang on the trees.
 Yellow strings laced the willows where I passed
 and fat streams parted their lips in the thaw.

 I came too late to hear the blessing said,
 but stood where lilacs burst and bees sang in

the white bloom over the grave.

The earth was closed in that sweet air. The
flowers drove

me north. Midway, the petals turned to snow.

The irony of leaving the frozen north and coming into the south with its "flowers" and "bees" and "sweet air" is readily apparent. Perhaps as she "hurrie[s] south," the poet's memories of the one who died become more vivid, are retrieved. Certainly it is significant that the dead one is buried in spring with all of the trappings of renewal in full force and with the hint of life-cycles present as well. But at this point, in this early poem which precedes most of Kumin's retrieval poems, she shies away from the notion that death leads to decay which leads to life. Instead, Kumin returns to the singular and sober realization of death as surely as she heads: "Homeward, the spendthrift streams pursed their mouths, / the trees unfleshed, the ground locked up its ruts, / and farther, death belonged / in this place. Weeks late the rotten ice went out." She has returned to a land where decay--obvious, ubiquitous--is a harbinger of life. Death is present here with the living, while the dead are surrounded by images of life and fecundity. There are hints here that the winter--and hence the decay--is giving way as the "rotten ice" melts and in the fact that this is the season of two springs: "Wet sunlight pulled the worms up, and that rock / I read as strict as ice / upon my map, sank

into spongy ground." Despite the overwhelming presence of decay here, in the "worms" and "spongy ground," there are also indications of that retrieval which is to come: worms aerate the soil, preparing the way for new growth; "wet sunlight" alludes to moisture and to sun, both of which are required for new growth; and "spongy ground" would seem to indicate a yielding of the frozen earth so that growth may now occur. There are hints of renewal here, hints that death will give way to life.

The notion that death gives rise to life, that life can occur only if there is death as well, requires an embracing of death; one must embrace it in a Dionysian acceptance of mortality--for life and renewal can come out of death:

That a man may be free of his ghosts
 he must return to them like a garden.
 He must put his hands in the sweet rot
 uprooting the turnips, washing them
 tying them into bundles
 and shouldering the whole load to market.

(HBFG, 3, "History Lesson")

To be free of the overwhelming presence of loss, one must learn to view one's dead as part of a continuum: they will become a "garden," with the capacity to nourish life.

Another way in which life arises from death is revealed in "The Excrement Poem" (RS, 50), the author's witty discussion of bodily functions. Stretching the

limits of poetic taste for some--thereby raising questions as to "suitable" topics for poetry--this poem treats the Dionysian notion of embracing that which is unseemly, of acknowledging that there is an underside of life which must be understood, and even welcomed. Excrement becomes a suitable topic for poetry because it is symbolic both of human transience and of our being grounded in the natural world. Kumin's perception of life-cycles dictates that we must accept the "underside" of life which encompasses both death and excrement, in addition to the more comely aspects of life. But the poet would have us remember that we cannot have growth and life without the accompanying refuse and death. While excrement does not literally mean death, of course, one can read it as symbolic of death in that it is comprised of waste products, material which is dead in terms of its use to its owner:

It is done by us all, as God disposes, from
the least cast of worm to what must have been
in the case of the brontosaur, say, spoor
of considerable heft, something awesome.

We eat, we evacuate, survivors that we are.

Human beings are no more or no less a part of nature than are other creatures; consequently, they are subject to the same physical processes of consuming food and excreting waste. In order to understand the way in which life is a continuum (and therefore to have hope of retrieving loss)

one must understand this connection with other creatures, as well as the physical nature of all creatures, human or otherwise. It is important to realize, in looking at the life process, that "we eat, we evacuate": one process does not occur without the other:

I think of what drops from us and must then
be moved to make way for the next and next.
However much we stain the world, spatter

it with our leavings, make stench, defile
the great formal oceans with what leaks down,
trundling off today's last barrowful,

I honor shit for saying: We go on.

Just as waste products signify that life is present, so too does death signify that life has been present and will be present again. Phoenix-like, "mushrooms spring up" from "the manure pile": life rises from death/waste. Kumin reinforces this notion as she writes, in the same poem, of cleaning her horses' stalls, "drawing the risen brown buns / toward me, fresh from the horse oven, as it were." These images which allude to fresh-baked goods, underscore the way in which waste nourishes life. On understanding this paradox, the poet finds hope for retrieval. Ronald Wallace terms the poem "tough" and "profound":

Throughout the poem Kumin compares shit with things that are pleasant. It is like 'risen brown buns...fresh from the horse oven,' making

the reader smell fresh bread and feel the warmth of the oven. It is 'alfalfa-green,' making the reader smell the peppery alfalfa, fresh and green. Or it is neutral, like putty, something readers would not mind working with in their hands. And finally, Kumin elevates shit to a religious level by using the word 'redelivered' and referring to God. By metaphor, Kumin transforms shit into something tasty, workable, almost sacred.

There are other interesting things to talk about in this poem: the movement from the latinate word 'excrement' to the more visceral 'shit'; the humor that runs throughout--the incongruity between wormshit and dinosaur shit, the pun in the last line.... Finally, the whole poem becomes a metaphor for survival. Shit suggests both death and rebirth as 'we go on.'²¹

Another poem which treats the theme of death giving rise to life, yet in a different manifestation, is "Thinking of Death and Dogfood" (HBFG, 97). In this poem the author considers both her own death and that of her beloved Amanda. Rather dispassionately, Kumin addresses the mare:

²¹ Ronald Wallace, "Babble and Doodle: Introducing Students to Poetry," College English Oct. 1981: 563-4.

Amanda, you'll be going
 to Alpo or to Gaines
 when you run out of luck;
 the flesh flensed from your bones
 your mammoth rib cage rowing
 away to the renderer's
 a dry canoe on a truck

So the mare will be turned, through her death, into food, into the possibility of life for other creatures. The poet's reconciliation to her mare's death is implied in the matter-of-fact tone used to describe the inevitability of the "'eating game,' in which everyone plays a deadly role, doomed to death and birth."²² Similarly, the poet herself will be fed back into the food-chain:

while I foresee my corpse
 slid feet first into fire
 light as the baker's loaf
 to make of me at least
 a pint of potash spoor.
 I'm something to sweeten the crops
 when the clock hand stops.

This image of the poet's death is a positive one, as she becomes "light as the baker's loaf"--the bread an image of fecundity and renewal as it is the "staff of life." Also,

²² Lawrence R. Ries, Wolf Masks: Violence in Contemporary Poetry (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1977): 42.

the poet's ashes will serve to "sweeten the crops"--she will be a type of fertilizer and hence will encourage and will nourish new life. The poet is heartened by the perception of herself within a continuum as "Time slips / another abacus bead." She would ask as well that others recognize her death as "life-affirming": "Let it not stick in the throat / or rattle a pane in the mind."

Leading to new life, death also offers hope for renewal. From winter, will come spring:

Every morning I rethink how common green
 --pond scum, a thousand sumac sprouts
 brome and rye grass, birdsfoot trefoil
 milkweed, poke, dock, dill, sorrel

bush and shrub, soft and hardwoods, all
 leafy headed--must go down again in
 frost and come again.

(LA, 63, "Strut")

All of this vegetation will flower and then die; it must "go down again" to be rejuvenated during spring, "the whole mess / of birth and rebirth the strut of the season"--with every new spring will come hope for renewal. Furthermore, Kumin inquires: "Is this a deep / head-tilting meditative thought, or / vernal instinctual, nothing more?" Making light of her own metaphysics, and human reputation as rational beings, Kumin suggests that our notion of continuum is instinctual. Kumin the cynic, the self-

described agnostic, would seem to surface in this wry summation of the human condition; she would seem to ask whether reason/religion or instinct drive human beings in their beliefs.

"May 10th" (P, 73) illustrates the "birth" of spring, of renewal. Birth is ubiquitous in nature as "the fiddleheads have forced their babies...and the shrew's children, twenty to a teaspoon, / breathe to their own astonishment." This poem richly describes retrieval in spring as the world comes back to life. A magical world--which harkens to fairies, nymphs, and myth--this microcosm births creatures so minuscule that they are "twenty to a teaspoon," and themselves astonished at their new life. The pervasive rebirth is reflected in the poet's observation that "in the pond, itself an inverted puddle, / tadpoles quake from the jello / and come into being." It is as if the world is birthing itself, climbing up out of some primordial ooze. The rebirth extends from ferns to shrews to bats to tadpoles to trees: "The maple's little used-up bells are dropping / and the new leaves are now unpacking, / still wearing their dime-store lacquer, / still cramped and wet from the journey." The maple carefully unpacks its new leaves, "still cramped and wet from the journey" of birth.

Another type of rebirth in nature occurs as the poet sees her lost people retrieved through animals. "Brushing the Aunts" (HBFG, 95) describes the way in which the poet

recalls her maiden aunts while grooming her mare. The physical act of brushing Amanda, along with the texture and color of the horse's coat, reminds Kumin of her now-dead aunts: "She evokes those good ghosts of my childhood / brillo-haired and big-boned, / Though barren like her, they were not petulant." As Kumin remembers her aunts, the mare, in essence, becomes an embodiment of the two aunts. Amanda continues the aunts as her coat aids the poet in their retrieval; as the animal retrieves and continues the aunts, so too is she continued and retrieved as parts of her recur through nature:

The power of the thorn holds the birds' late
nests

now strung like laundry from the blackberry canes
where parts of Amanda recur.

Her body fuzz is stickered in the oriole cups.

Copper hairs from her tail hang the packages up.

A continuum of retrieval is formed as the mare reminds the poet of her aunts, and is herself carried forth into nature, becoming part of birds' nests--thereby giving rise to the new life sheltered there--and dotting the landscape with hair from her coat.

The theme of lost people reclaimed through animals is continued in "The Retrieval System" (RS, 1), in which Kumin examines the bonds between human beings and animals, and becomes cognizant of the way in which her lost ones seem to be reincarnated in her animals:

It begins with my dog, now dead, who all his long
life

carried about in his head the brown eyes of my
father,

keen, loving, accepting, sorrowful, whatever;

they were Daddy's all right, handed on, except
for their phosphorescent gleam tunneling the
night

which I have to concede was a separate gift.

Physical features of human beings are inherited by animals
so that there seems to be a "family" connection between
them and so that they appear to be part of a continuum, the
human beings passing their features onto and being
transformed into animals:

Uncannily when I'm alone these features
come to link up my lost people
with the patient domestic beasts of my life....

.

My elderly aunts, wearing the heads of willful
intelligent ponies, stand at the fence begging
apples.

The sister who died at three has my cat's faint
chin,

my cat's inscrutable squint, and cried catlike in
pain.

As the poet is able to discern such continuing traits which
are shared by animals with human beings, she is able to

retrieve her lost ones. Kumin's view of animals as innocent, purified versions of human beings--which shall be discussed at length elsewhere--is evident here as she notes, further in the poem: "it is people who fade, / it is animals who retrieve them." Human beings are well-retrieved in the "patient domestic beasts of [her] life." The animals seem to continue not only the physical, but also the spiritual aspects of Kumin's lost.

Kumin's theme of retrieval also becomes clear as she writes of the way the earth reclaims that which has been lost to it. Encroaching civilization erects houses, forcing an unnatural order on the wilderness it (temporarily) subsumes. But the forces of nature are much to be reckoned with, so that a house, for example, is taken back into the earth after it is abandoned:

As after a great drought
 the earth opens its holes
 to raise the water table,
 the stairs undo their buttons.
 The risers, each an individual,
 slip out of plumb.
 Seams, pores, and crazings unpucker
 making ready for frost.
 A tongue of water
 circles the cellar wall
 and locks itself in.
 (NF, 30, "Country House")

Reclaiming its loss, the earth renders the house again part of the wilderness, thereby reimposing its natural order. The house seems to become a living thing, broken out of a state of suspended animation:

After a long presence of people,
 after the emptying out,
 the laying bare,
 the walls break into conversation.
 Their little hairlines ripple
 and an old smile
 crosses the chimney's face.

After the abandonment the house becomes, in a sense, one of nature's creatures again. There is a sense of continuity and timelessness here that outlasts human beings, excluding them in part. The house will be taken back into the wilderness and will be absorbed, thereby giving rise to life in other forms.

The house is absorbed back into the earth in the same fashion that other decaying material is reabsorbed. "Cellar Hole in Joppa" (NF, 10) describes this reclamation, placing the house within a context of other decaying things:

Bearing in mind the way
 the earth takes back into itself each year
 half an inch or so of rot,
 digesting amiably enough deer
 droppings, splinters of dead birds, the splay

of struck trees and what-
 ever man has left behind,
 we dig down in the caved-in place
 we think a house stood on, its chimney fac-
 ing east, still the prevailing wind.

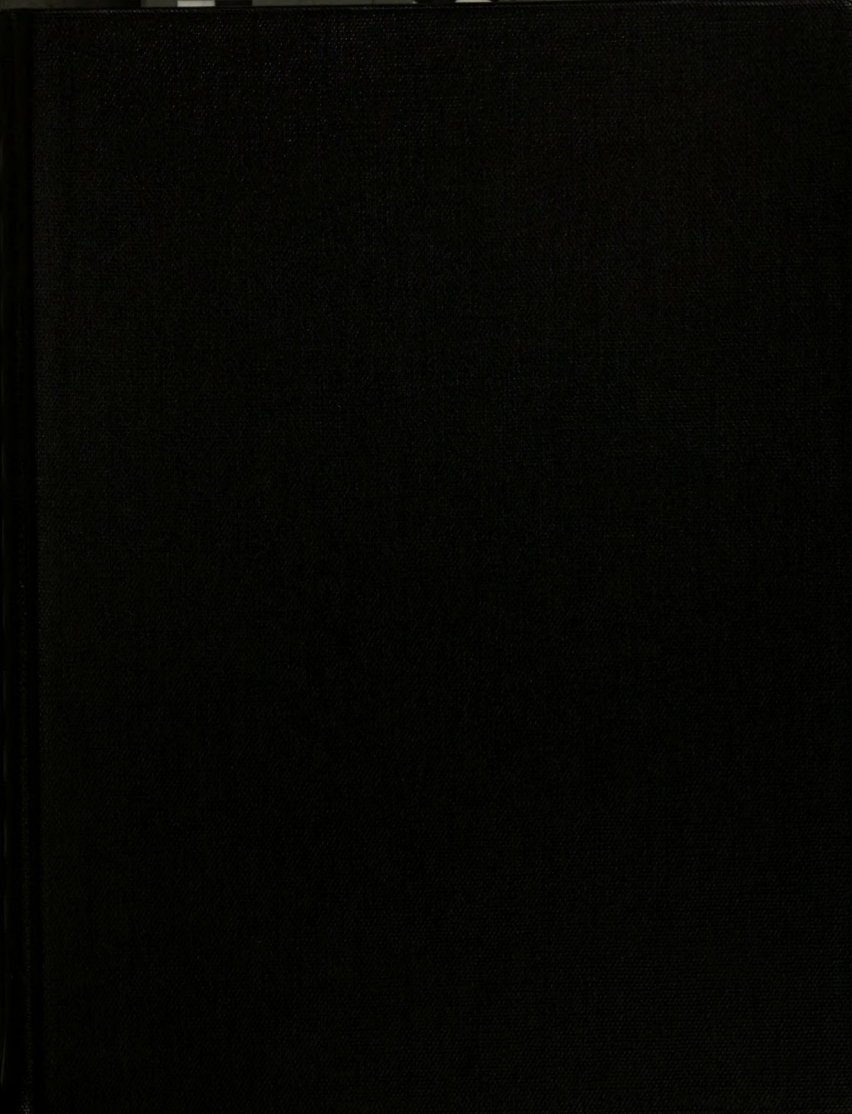
The qualities of this has-been house are nearly human as the "chimney fac- / [es] east," as if in Moslem prayer. The end-line split "fac-" reinforces the perception of the chimney as having a face. So it is as if this living, almost-human being has died and has been reabsorbed into the earth. The house has been so thoroughly buried, taken back into the earth, that only bits and pieces of a former life have been unearthed in the "graveyard," evincing an earlier life:

The trash heap underneath the groundsill
 gives up at last a piece of bowl.
 A pot the rust has eaten down to crumbs
 of blood flakes against our thumbs.

Then a blue bottle, ink crusted but whole.

The trappings of the unnatural order of civilization, which represent Nature's temporary loss of order, are taken back into the earth, mulched for new life. The poet is put in mind of "the way / us hangers-on will also be / reclaimed," the way in which we will also be subsumed into the earth, the way in which the earth will reclaim us when the time is right.

Kumin's retrieval poems are quite diverse in their discussion of the ways in which loss can be reclaimed. Her perspective on loss and recovery--as well as the many ways loss can be tempered--is reflective of a uniquely courageous and innovative method of staving off bereavement in its multitude of forms. These poems reflect vigorous efforts to transmute the negative into the positive as Kumin's early poetry shows an overwhelming sense of deprivation, and then efforts at recovery begin to emerge through the body of her work. Kumin's efforts at restoration are representative of her metaphysics, of viewing Nature and its powers of reclamation as redeeming and purifying; they signify belief in the saving grace of family and ancestry, as represented in the tribal poems; and they indicate the ways in which loss in one reality has a parallel of retrieval in another reality. The retrieval poems demonstrate methods of tempering loss to make its effects less dreadful, less permanent. Through the retrieval poems, through metaphor, Kumin reclaims her lost and brings them back into immediacy and life.



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MAKING THE CONNECTION: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS
OF MAXINE KUMIN'S POETRY

VOLUME II

By

Cheryl Lynn Vossekuil

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of English

1988

Chapter 4 Between "The Jesus Infection" and
 "Dear Absent God": The Poet as Jew
 and Agnostic in a Christian Society

Like most of her dominant themes, that of the poet as Jew and agnostic in a Christian society also pervades Kumin's work. Although born into a Jewish family, she was sent for several years to a Catholic school;¹ her concern with this theme therefore has many different manifestations, revealing a lack of absolutes, as well as an increasing perception of herself as "outsider."²

¹ Kumin speaks of the convent's influence on her life: "Throughout all the years of my childhood and adolescence, [Mother Rosarine] and her nuns had been our next-door neighbors. Side by side we were Catholics and Jews in a predominantly Protestant suburb. I ranged as freely through the nunnery as other youngsters might swarm in a park or playground. I had always thought of it as my second home. As the poem ["Mother Rosarine"] progressed, it began to seem as though the convent had been perhaps my first home.... Mother Rosarine had been a second or surrogate mother, a good harbor from whatever small storms were then ruffling my private life." (Maxine Kumin, "The Making of 'Mother Rosarine,'" Writer Apr. 1970: 19-21.)

² Carolyn Heilbrun speaks of her own recognition of being an outsider: "I began to understand that having been a Jew, however unobserved that identification was, however fiercely I had denied the adamant anti-Semitism all around me as I grew up--still, having been a Jew had made me an outsider.... Women are often outsiders twice over. The Jew, for example, has often been cited as the classic example of the outsider. Yet Jewish women were traditionally excluded from much of the religious observance by which Orthodox Jews marked their own identity." (Carolyn Heilbrun, Reinventing Womanhood (New York: W.W. Norton, 1970): 20-37.)

Furthermore, Judaism shares with other patriarchal religions, an attempt to confine women to limited roles and possibilities.³ There is a strong historical basis for perceiving women as less-than-equal according to Jewish law and teaching. Gail B. Shulman details ancient Judaism's attitudes toward women, some of which persist today in spirit:

The forms of address used by husband and wife underscore the patriarchal structure of the Jewish family in Talmudic times. Whereas she called him 'Rabbi,' the term a slave or student used to mean 'my master,' he called her 'my daughter....'⁴

³ Naomi R. Goldenberg treats women's role in Judaism in her Changing of the Gods (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979): "Although Jewish leaders do not argue against female equality in the same terms as Pope Paul did, they must respect Jewish law and tradition. This is the essence of Judaism--to the same extent that the nature of Christ is the essence of Christianity. The role and image of females in Jewish law is very different from that of males. The law is supposed to make women--again the familiar phrase--separate but equal. Yet men perform the most important acts of religious duty and women are seen as people who prepare food and tend home and children so that men may be free to worship and study Torah. In orthodox synagogues, women sit apart from men so as not to distract them. In synagogues in which this physical separation is not enforced, women are separated from men by the words of Talmud and Torah, which instruct females to be content with their subordinate roles in the Jewish community. The nature of the religion lies in interplay between a father-god and His sons. In such a religion, women will always be on the periphery. When Jewish women takes a central place in their religion, they will no longer be practicing Judaism." (pp. 7-8)

⁴ Shulman, 150.

Although it is unfair to judge Judaism's perception of women by ancient precepts, one must be aware of such teachings to understand tradition as well as current practice. Shulman observes that change was slow in coming to Judaism:

In comparison with many Protestant denominations which were affected by the first wave of feminism in the nineteenth century, Judaism has remained relatively untouched [as of 1974] (for example, the first American woman rabbi was not ordained until 1972). Contemporary Jewish publications have only recently begun to print articles dealing with the status of women in Judaism. Many of the articles are written by men, frequently apologists defending the status quo by explaining that in Judaism women are not considered inferior; rather, they are to be praised and glorified...when they stay in their proper place.... This concept of 'separate but equal'--male definition of the female as equal so long as her function is separate from his--defines her solely in terms of biology....⁵

While Judaism is by no means alone in continuing patriarchal values, it is no less damaging:

For a female child, growing up in the Judaic

⁵ Shulman, 144-5.

tradition can be a disturbing experience. The model set before her of the traditional Jewish woman is a male-defined, biologically-derived model--that of wife, mother, homemaker, member of the Ladies' Auxiliary, and basically non-participating observer in the rituals and services of the synagogue.⁶

In addition, the poet lives in Protestant American society, further complicating her being caught between religious ideologies. For the other religions--Catholicism and Calvinism--which were foisted upon the child also view women as less-than- complete human beings, though all three ideologies venerate women in significant ways. None offered Kumin's spirituality a comfortable home, for these as well as other reasons. These troubling and confusing situations have led the poet to profess agnosticism, although even while she turns away from formalized religion, she finds, in nature, a sense of a divine being.⁷

⁶ Shulman, 143.

⁷ Goldenberg also postulates that the Judaeo-Christian tradition holds nature in disrespect. "A number of religious thinkers have suggested that the ecology crisis has been engendered by the derogatory attitude Judaism and Christianity have toward non-human life. They call into question the usefulness of Judaeo-Christian Teachings about man's superiority over nature, about 'his' destiny to conquer nature and to harness 'her' for 'his' use. Is it possible, theologians are asking, that these very teachings have spurred man to destroy so much of the world of plants and animals? It certainly is difficult to image pagans, with their awe and respect for natural life, killing off

In her early poems, in particular, this theme appears overtly as the poet seeks to reconcile her lack of absolutes, as she examines her Jewishness--both as heritage/ancestry and as religion--and as she considers Christianity as well. As the theme evolves throughout her poetry, it appears less overtly in the later poems, becoming integrated into Kumin's nature poems, and thereby appearing as a dual perception of depraved human beings and of a reverence for nature. Dissatisfied with the religious alternatives available to her, Kumin explores new spiritual possibilities. Carol Christ defines women's quest as seeking "a wholeness that unites the dualisms of spirit and body, rational and irrational [both sets of dualisms most often split into a male/female dichotomy], nature and freedom, spiritual and social, life and death, which have plagued Western consciousness."⁸

Given her lack of absolutes, Kumin claims to be agnostic, rejecting formalized religion.⁹ She becomes convinced also of the perversity of human beings, a belief leading her to look to the "dark obedient order" (UC, 21,

whole species or dumping industrial wastes into lakes and rivers. Such actions can be done only by people who think themselves above the material world which spawned them." (p. 106)

⁸ Christ, Diving Deep..., 8.

⁹ However, the language of belief threads its way throughout Kumin's poetry. In an interview, for example, she described winning the Pulitzer as "a big hand [that] came out of the sky and delivered me the Pulitzer." (Litwack, 70.)

"Stones") of nature to make sense of the world. In my interview with her, Kumin maintained that, although there is an essential cruelty in nature, there is no depravity, no considered malevolence there.

But the poet-agnostic displays more of a sense of a divine being than the term "agnostic" would imply. She develops a reverence for nature, finding within this "order" a sense of a divine force or being that rules nature; this veneration of nature then becomes the manifestation of the albeit transmuted theme of the poet as Jew and agnostic in a Christian society. The later poems demonstrate a reconciliation of the search for absolutes as Kumin comes to terms with herself as Jew and as she finds a metaphysical home in the order of nature as proof of a divine force, as illustrated in retrieval, in reincarnation, and in life-cycles. Women often experience a resolution of spiritual quest--mysticism--in nature.

Many of Kumin's poems reflect a richness of heritage and ancestry, weaving tradition and customs into an intricately-detailed tapestry.¹⁰ "For Anne At Passover"

¹⁰ Consequently, it is indeed odd that Harold Rosenberg claims that Kumin's Jewishness is not easily seen in her poetry: "Kumin has no bohemian vices or minority scars. Her 'Jewish heritage'...is not that of the slums nor even of the big city but is a biographical detail coupled with her 'love of the turbulent New England coast.' Her themes are picturesque and out-of-doors: swimming, picnicking, ice-skating. One might wonder why the Jewish fact was brought up at all; it does not affect her rhetoric and enters her subject matter only through such 'New Yorkerish' exotica as 'our lop-eared Menorah...the membrane scrolls of Torah' in a poem of friendship to a Chinese who

(H, 100), for example, describes the passover rituals, placing them in counterpoint to the rituals of Easter celebrated concurrently by the Christian world. "The damask cloth," "the loving cup / brimmed with sweet wine," and the "bittersweet" are contrasted with "fat chocolate rabbits," "Madonna lilies," and "egg[s] / with a crystal candy scene." In this early poem, too, belief in Jewish precepts, rather than mere ritual, is clear: "we are marked in the blood / of an earlier lamb, and call God good." In addition to the sense of ritual provided through Judaism, the reader finds doctrine as well. This poem also contrasts the world of the Christian and the world of the Jew, juxtaposing them and describing the poet's sense that the whole world seems to be celebrating Easter while the poet celebrates Passover:

Cold Easter week and the hard buds, forming,
shake
their miter caps at me. The tower bells
sing Christly sweet, and everywhere
new scents--honey and blood--work the air.

The poet is assailed and alienated by the images of "cold Easter week," so that even the "hard buds...shake / their

had comparable objects in his background and loved chopped liver and lox. Her poem to Passover, a major statement in the collection [her first, Halfway], is equally a poem to Easter and to a rite of the Bakonga, the blended style perfectly mirroring a blended humanity." (Harold Rosenberg, "Six American Poets," Commentary Oct. 1961: 352-3.)

miter caps at" her, almost as if in
 mockery/assault/reproof. Then too, there are "new scents"
 "everywhere," as if there is no escaping them. These smells
 are comprised of both "honey and blood"--perhaps signifying
 the salvation believed in by Christians, "blood" in the
 spilled blood of Christ, and "honey" in that the act was a
 saving one. For Jews, the "honey" is the blessing of the
 Passover--denoting the promise of the land of milk and
 honey-- while the "blood" is indicative of the persecution
 which the Jews undergo because of the crucifixion. These
 "scents...work" the air, as if they are working a crowd of
 marks at a carnival; the word "work" here, with its
 connotation of trickery/deception, underscores the poet's
 cynical attitude toward formal religion: both Jews and
 Christians are being duped during Passover and Easter.
 Certainly this time of concurrent religious holidays
 provokes mixed feelings in the poet.

"Haman's Ears" (P, 39) weaves the biblical story of
 Esther with the description of a custom that Jews learn as
 children: "no little American Jew wants to be Haman. / As
 the story is told them, the children have shakers they
 rattle / to drown out so much as the sound of his name."
 As they learn this story, the children incorporate a sense
 of heritage as well as an understanding of the biblical
 story. Depictions such as these--the relating of
 customs/heritage--are woven throughout the poems, detailed
 in the stories and rituals children assimilate, as well as

in the symbols of Judaism the poet and her husband retain and incorporate into their lives in many ways. In an apostrophe the poet speaks to her Chinese friend (H, 91, "One Dead Friend"), describing a melding of their cultures. Her friend loved:

chopped chicken
livers, lox and black bread, liturgies
sung through the nose and soft as muslin;
our old lop-eared Menorah
because you held on in Tientsin,
the bowlegged Hebrew alphabet
you squinted at and would redo
as symbols that you learned to paint
in childhood....

Particularly clear in poems such as these, Kumin's Jewishness is plentiful throughout her work, though more overt in the earlier poems. In the later poems, in particular, the poet retains the richness of ancestry and heritage connected with her Jewish roots, though she separates herself, for the most part, from the religious implications.

Religious absolutes were difficult to come by for the child, due, in large part, to the fact that she was sent to a convent school during "that critical period that Jesuits refer to" when a child is very pliable.¹¹ The experience

¹¹ Norris, 12.

of being educated by nuns is treated in several poems illustrating the divergent forces at work as Catholicism and Judaism battle each other within her. In the convent school the child undergoes a loss of innocence as she realizes that Jews are accused of killing Christ. In addition to the confusion produced by juxtaposing Catholic beliefs on Judaism, she also connects violence and horrific death with God as the nuns teach her of "saints who died / aflame and silent at the stake" so that when she "saw their Christ, [she] cried" (H, 16, "Halfway"). The two religions--certainly at odds with each other--produce a jumble of violence and contradiction within her. Catholicism--with its doctrine of the Jew as unbeliever--would seem to seek, by its very nature, to strike down Jewish beliefs. Paradoxically, the poems treating her convent education describe the nuns and Mother Rosarine in particular as being "kind" (H, 16, "Halfway") and even maternal. Kumin herself observes: "Although I'm grateful for some wonderful relationships with the nuns, they instilled in me tremendous anxiety about my immortal soul.... The Catholic influence...was very unsettling since I was growing up in a Jewish family..."¹² Consequently, the poet is unable to find a home in formal religion. "Halfway" (H, 16) illustrates this confusion by relating that:

¹² Norris, 12.

As true as I was born into
 my mother's bed in Germantown,
 the gambrel house in which I grew
 stood halfway up a hill, or down,
 between a convent and a madhouse.

The poem ironically describes both nunnery and madhouse,
 mingling the two so that they seem interchangeable:

The priest came early on the grass,
 black in rubbers up the stairs
 or have I got it wrong? The mass
 was from the madhouse and the priest
 came with a black bag to his class
 and ministered who loved him least.
 They shrieked because his needles stung.
 They sang for Christ upon His cross.
 The plain song and the bedlam hung
 on the air and blew across
 into the garden where I played.

Both madhouse and convent intrude on the Edenic solitude of
 the young child playing in her "garden," in innocence. As
 the songs meld, so too do the forces of madhouse and
 convent blend to bring the child to the point where there
 are no absolutes, but rather, "All the iron truths I knew /
 stood halfway up a hill, or down." Replaced by a host of
 conflicting ideas and ambiguous philosophies, her innocence
 has been lost.

The lack of absolutes is exacerbated by other factors present in the young poet's life as well, and is described in such poems as "Fraulein Reads Instructive Rhymes" (H, 20), in which the poet notes the ways that Fraulein commands her young charges to obey, teaching them about one version of God as she does so: "Mind me, says Fraulein. God stands up in Heaven. / See how He watches? He snatches the bad ones." This vision of God is of an angry, vengeful God who "watches" little children, waiting for them to do wrong so that he can "snatch" them up when they err: the use of the word "snatch" here suggests a predatory God who, hawklike, swoops upon and devours the unfortunate. This God is one who--like the poem itself, which describes vengeance on evil children--terrifies children and plants seeds of guilt in them as they wait to be punished, probably sure, as many small children are, that they are guilty of enough to be hauled up before God and judgment at any time.

With such influences as Fraulein and the convent, the child's beliefs in Judaism--portions of which she could not help but incorporate from her parents--are placed into question. The adult poet understandably questions: her heritage; whether she belongs anywhere; and finally, whether she has a soul. The search for absolutes arises from the loss of one clear path to follow. The governing assumption of life becomes uncertainty. In a 1975 interview with Martha George Meek, Kumin speaks of "an

essay by Joseph Wood Krutch called 'The Phantom of Certitude.'

He describes all the touchstones of Victorian times when there was the centrality of a belief in the one God and a kind of Calvinist faith in salvation through grace--all of those surenesses that imposed an order in which you could feel that you were growing in a tradition, in which you belonged to an ongoing tradition of the infinite perfectibility of man. I think all those certitudes have been taken from us.¹³

Any sense of surety was eradicated for the child as forceful authority figures--her parents and the intimidating presences of the nuns--presented drastically-different views of the world. Consequently, in poems such as "Body and Soul: A Meditation" (RS, 43), the adult poet speculates on the location and existence of the soul. She notes that she "ought to have paid closer / attention when Miss Bloomberg / shepherded the entire fifth grade / into the Walk-Through Woman." Describing the incident in mystical terms, the poet questions whether she would have learned anything of the soul from this experience:

I remember the violet light
which made it churchly
and the heartbeat amplified

¹³ Meek, 21.

to echo from chamber to chamber
like God speaking unto Moses.

But there was nothing about the soul,
that miners' canary flitting
around the open spaces;
no diagram in which
the little ball-bearing soul
bumbled her way downhill
in the pinball machine
of the interior, clicking
against the sternum,
the rib cage, the pelvis.

Education did not mitigate against or clarify the lack of absolutes the poet felt, but rather, provided more questions perhaps, as nothing is mentioned of the soul.

In addition to the lack of absolutes caused by conflicting religious/spiritual ideas, the child had to contend with guilt from several different sources. After she becomes cognizant of the role the Jews played in the crucifixion and the blame attributed to them for this, she feels the guilt of complicity through her heritage. "Sisyphus" (P, 5) treats this complicated issue, describing the child's incorporation of guilt:

When I was young and full of shame
I knew a legless man who came

inside a little cart, inchmeal,
flatirons on his hands, downhill.

Under the railroad bridge his chant
singsonged all day 'repent, repent

for Jesus.' On the way to school
I spoke to him to save my soul.

In an extended metaphor on the subject of guilt, the poet describes this "legless man" who implores those who pass to "repent." But this man also seems to be a seductive, even evil force: "Eyes level with my petticoat / he whined to me. I smelled his goat- / smell, randy, thick, as brown as blood." His eyes low enough to look up her dress, this "randy" creature is depicted in demonic terms with his "goat-smell," a description often used in connection with the devil. There is also an indication of perverse sacrifice or communion with the words "brown as blood." Additionally, the odd creature becomes a manifestation of the guilt that the child feels as she encounters the forces which would urge her to repent:

I wheeled my master up the hill.
I rolled him up as he sat still.

Up past the sisters of Saint Joe
I pushed my stone so God would know.

And he, who could not genuflect
on seamy stumps, stitched his respect

with fingers in the air. He called
me a perfect Christian child.

As a "perfect Christian child" might, the young girl pushes her "stone" of guilt up the hill, thereby earning the blessing of the "legless man," who makes the sign of the cross for her--a dubious blessing for a Jew, certainly. The poem continues: "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." The lesson which the "basket man" taught, the paradigm of guilt, has been internalized so that the poet, like Sisyphus, must carry this guilt with her; she could not even acknowledge that she was a Jew.

The child learns of another type of guilt as she recognizes that "although [she] lived in a safe America [her] father's relatives were going into the ovens,"¹⁴ a theme reflected over and over in the poetry: "At that time, my father's cousins / and yours by the same remove / were bleeding from Jewish noses; / were salted into mass graves" (P, 25, "Bedtime Story"). On visiting Amsterdam and recalling the atrocities of the Nazi regime the adult poet includes herself among those "who grew up in a safe place"

¹⁴ Elson and Hughes, 9.

(P, 21, "The Amsterdam Poem") and remembers herself as a young child:

In '33 I was eight years old,
soon to begin the Nazi nightmares
a hundred cold
wakings upstairs
in a warm bed in Germantown,
Pennsylvania.

Ironically living in "Germantown," the young American Jew is about to experience the nightmares that include shame at being safe in addition to the other horrors--there is something of survivors' guilt to be found here. The guilt is exacerbated as the poet watches her father "cry like a child. / He will knuckle his eyes, to my terror, / over the letters that come from the grave / begging to be sponsored, plucked up, saved" (HBFG, 5, "The Thirties Revisited"). The "safe" child is assaulted by the realization of what it is to be a Jew: it can be fatal if you are in the wrong place at the wrong time--not a comforting lesson to learn about the world, to be sure.

Another aspect of the theme of the Jew in a Christian society is the reality of living not only in a Christian society, but in one also primarily Protestant. The poet finds herself in the position of being born and raised in a Jewish family, educated--during the formative years--in a Catholic school, a convent school, no less (and living next to the convent so that the nuns become her friends, and she

spends much time at the convent), and living in a Protestant society. "Living Alone With Jesus" (HBFG, 25) treats the isolation one can feel as a Jew in a Christian society, as well as the intrusiveness of that society which feels that it has the right to try to save one's soul:

Can it be

I am the only Jew residing in Danville, Kentucky,
looking for matzoh in the Safeway and the A & P?

The Sears Roebuck salesman wrapping my potato
masher

advises me to accept Christ as my personal
saviour

or else when I die I'll drop straight down to
hell,

but the ladies who come knocking with their
pamphlets

say as long as I believe in God that makes us
sisters in Christ. I thank them kindly.

Residing temporarily in this little town, the poet is beset by people urging Christ on her in places as innocuous as Sears & Roebuck. With its appeal to American masses, as well as its ubiquitous, national presence, Sears symbolizes here the pervasiveness of the Christian influence as well as its oppressiveness to those whose beliefs do not concur. There is evidence of the outsider here, the individual who is alienated from the mainstream of beliefs operating in the society. But there is also the realization of

violation in that one's most private business--one's immortal soul--becomes fair game for anyone who cares to take a shot at it. Reflected in the fact that "in the county there are thirty-seven churches / and no butcher shop," the piety of the community is clear. There is no escaping this pervasive, Protestant influence; even in the sanctity of her apartment, alone, the outer world infringes on her privacy:

Every afternoon at five I am comforted
by the carillons of the Baptist church next door.
I let the rock of ages cleave for me on Monday.
Tuesday I am washed in the blood of the lamb.
Bringing in the sheaves on Wednesday keeps me
busy.

Thursday's the day on Christ the solid rock I
stand.

The Lord lifts me up to higher ground on Friday
so that

Saturday I put my hands in the nail-scarred
hands.

Nevertheless, I stay put on the Sabbath. I let
the whiskey bottle say something scurrilous.

The intrusion of the carillon hymns is so complete that the poet feels compelled to participate in the notions of the hymns, even learning their lyrics. The description in this segment directly involves the poet and underlies the infusion of the hymns; she is actively involved with these

hymns, as the verbs attest. She, not someone else, is "washed," "bring[s] in the sheaves," "stand[s]...on the solid rock," and so forth.

Protestant society obtrudes even as the poet swims, humming "Abide With Me" (P, 3, "Morning Swim")--a standard Protestant hymn--as she does her laps. It foists itself upon her also as she waits for a traffic light to change; a young woman holds a sign that demands:

'WHERE WILL YOU SPEND ETERNITY?'

while the husband, hearty, even beefy
waves all to 'COME TO JESUS'

.

They stand foursquare
sheltered in the Lord, pinning car
by car its occupants
en route to surf or Sunday brunch
with eye contact as steadfast as
an egret grazing the canals
who darts and pecks and lunges
and after an eternity
at Lytle and South Dixie
the light changes.

(LA, 44, "Waiting for the End in New Smyrna
Beach,

Florida")

The persona's discomfort is obvious as the would-be evangelists "pin" the cars' occupants with eye contact as

if they were butterflies or insects, trapped. She cannot flee this onslaught and it seems "an eternity" until the light changes and escape becomes possible. In comparing the evangelists with the egrets, the poet implies that, just as egrets are driven by something primordial to "dart" and "peck" and "lunge," so too are the evangelists compelled by something they do not understand.

Because she has come to consider herself an agnostic, the intrusions of the Christian society into Kumin's life are particularly irksome to her. A number of poems, particularly later ones, set forth this theme. The poet calls "the random clock of the universe" (H, 91, "One Dead Friend") the ruling force which metes out death. In another poem she tells her son "we only think we choose" (H, 80, "Poem For My Son"), but in actuality we have little, if any, control over the majority of our lives. In "High Dive: A Variant" (H, 50), she records the way in which divers seem to be able to challenge the abyss:

Washed in or out of sleep, the rite
is mortal: to fall in old lands till
hands slip on air, limbs muster full

force, and death, old master full
of craft lets go. We wake, we have fled.
And will tomorrow let us steal
another rescue, our human wit
praying the dark to underwrite

the force that sucks us from the peak?

The "rite" of diving seems to offer hope of control over that which is uncontrollable. However, it is illusion: "we wake, we have fled." All is uncertainty as we fight against "the force that sucks us from the peak." This description and the ones that precede it give rise to an understanding of the world as ruled by chance rather than through a sense of divine force at work in the world. The poet-agnostic insists that: "myths knit up the world when men die / for love; and if they lie, love needs the lie" (H, 110, "For Anne At Passover"). The story of Christ--prominent during the Holy Week of Easter--is no more than a myth, the poet claims. She observes too that she could not believe in order to rid herself of sin, "could not make Him to unmake her sin": Christianity will not work for her. But Judaism will not work either, except as a sense of ancestry and heritage.

Although Kumin rejects the religious aspects of being a Jew, she is mindful of her Jewish ancestry, celebrating the holidays and holding to certain of the rituals. In my interview with her, Kumin commented that she thinks of herself as practicing "kitchen religion"--celebrating Jewish holidays much as would-be Christians celebrate Easter and Christmas, by preparing special foods/feasts. This notion of commemorating her heritage is wound throughout her poetry, but is particularly noteworthy in the later poetry, because it is the later poetry that deals

less overtly with the theme of the poet as Jewish in a Christian society, yet provides a rich sense of ancestry. A sense of the poet's Jewish heritage (as well as the fact that her mother was her precursor in dealing with the complications of being a Jew in a Protestant society) is revealed in poems such as "The Chain" (LA, 5):

Here my mother spent her girlhood, not
without complications, playing
the Methodist church organs for weddings,
funerals, and the Sunday choir.
Here her mother, holding a lily-shaped
ear trumpet, stepped down from the surrey
Grandfather drove forty miles to Roanoke
to witness the blowing of the shofar
on Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur.

The "chain" links Kumin to her relatives not only through a mother/daughter chain, but also through the sense of sameness as they similarly must survive in Christian societies, even "playing / the Methodist church organ." This poem is typical of her later poems in that there is a strong sense of heritage and connection with Jewish roots, although the later poems less overtly treat Jewish themes. In these poems there is not so much an attention to struggling with concepts of God and of Jewishness as there is attention to tradition, heritage, and maintaining identity.

In "The Poet Visits Egypt and Israel" (LA, 30), Kumin

describes her political sense of being a Jew. Visiting Egypt (on a State Department tour) the poet details "her status as guest from another, unveiled life." In this strange environment, the poet recognizes "a floating unease [that] causes her hands to shake," for:

She is a goddess, rich, white, American,

and a Jew. It says so in some of her poems.

There are no visible Jews in the American
Embassy, nor at the Cultural Center, and none
turns up in Cairo or Alexandria
although an itinerant rabbi is rumored

to cross from the other side once a fortnight.

Feeling even more isolated from this society than she must in Protestant America, she is out of her element here: again, an isolated Jew in a contemporary society. Although fewer of Kumin's later poems treat the issue of the poet's Jewishness overtly, the theme does persist of ancestry endures, even if it becomes less overt. This particular manifestation of the theme of the Jew--exploring one's sense of Jewishness in a non-American context--represents the poet's placing of herself in a world, as opposed to a national, context and reflects an emerging attention in Kumin's poetry to the larger world and to more political concerns. In fact, the poet (in my interview with her) recognized that she has changed her opinion of political poetry, and now deems it almost a necessity.

One aspect of being a Jew is that there is pain involved--pain that comes from several directions. The poet first realizes pain as she learns that while she is safe in her American child's bed, her father's cousins are being killed in Nazi Germany, after sending "letters that come from the grave / begging to be sponsored, plucked up, saved" (HBFG, 5, "The Thirties Revisited"). As has been elsewhere mentioned, the poet feels guilt pain due to being a "survivor." Also, as an adult--and understanding that she is not responsible for the deaths of her relatives (that she survived did not cause their deaths)--Kumin visits Amsterdam--an experience set forth in one of her first political poems--(NF, 21, "The Amsterdam Poem") and finds that she resents the way in which life has gone on in Amsterdam, the way in which healing has occurred.

In the morning we go to the gallery.

The exhibit is called Bittere Jaren,

1935-1941.

We who grew up in a safe place

expect the iron cross, the sealed boxcars

but the bitter years turn out to be

a rerun of the dustbowl by

Steichen, Walker Evans, Ben Shahn.

The irony of her expecting evidence of Nazi atrocities and finding instead evidence of pain of a different sort, hunger, is underscored as Kumin describes seeing posters of "The American Way" with families of four "smiling their

toothpaste smiles" and juxtaposes this memory with photographs of sharecroppers: "Here are the bloated babies / and the farms whipped into sand." The poet is chastened by this realization:

We two Americans, we two fools
taking in the town on our five-day week
hunch like turkey buzzards and
cannot lift our eyes and
do not speak.

In Amsterdam for their tourist "five-day week," the poet and her companion come to a realization that the magnitude of one type of suffering or pain does not diminish another. The absurdity of her being judgmental is underscored by the fact that she is a tourist, a casual observer who will stay a few days and then leave; therefore, she has no right to pronounce judgment.

Yet Amsterdam calls up many memories of atrocities to the Jews. The poet visits Anne Frank's hide-out, haunted by the irony of being safe "in a warm bed" while Jews were being killed in Europe, while Anne Frank, close in age to the poet, was taken away to die. The images of the doomed Anne Frank, "the SS," the starving Dutch, and the child-poet safe in America become overwhelming:

In 1941, there wasn't a pigeon here
and the Dutch had begun to eat rats.
What can't I forgive? The rebirth of pigeons?
Of caring? Of live and let live? The carillons

in the Westerkirk on the corner ring out.
 An old woman hawks eels from a pushcart.
 For suffering there is no quantum. What heals
 the city, its citizens, I know nothing about.

Tomorrow KLM can fly us out.

The poet learns that life has gone on in this city--healing has taken place. But she also realizes that she still holds much pain, a very personal pain. What she has expected to find in Amsterdam, she has not found; but "for suffering there is no quantum": even if Amsterdam has healed, her pain--as an adult--remains. In a 1979 interview with Karla Hammond¹⁵ Kumin speaks of her inability to forgive in the poem:

What I was saying is that I seem to be the one who can't forgive. The people who actually endured the suffering, came through the experience, picked up their lives again, and have assumed this attitude of normalcy. That was the incredible thing about being in Amsterdam and going to the Anne Frank house.... I don't know what constitutes suffering any more than I know what constitutes the healing process.¹⁶

¹⁵ Prairie, 47.

¹⁶ Hammond, 54.

As the poet comes to terms with being a Jew in a Christian society, she develops an attitude of cynicism toward Christianity, and toward organized religion as a whole. This cynicism develops as the poet matures and makes a transition from believing in "infinite change" to believing in "infinite depravity" (GT, 36, "Lines Written in the Library of Congress After the Cleanth Brooks Lecture"). In part, the change is brought about as Kumin realizes that Christianity, in itself, is not objectionable, but what is objectionable is the fact that human beings have perverted the teachings of Christ so that the love of Christ becomes the "joke of love" (H, 83, "Eleventh-Century Doors"). Kumin speaks of the ways in which Jews were persecuted in the name of Christ:

Jesus
 in this
 century You were so loved that
 a Jew outside the pale would have
 his belly slit and a live cat
 sewn up in it.
 (H, 83, "Eleventh-Century Doors")

Cruelties such as this are manifestations of the ways that imperfect and perverse human beings distort what were meant as teachings of love so that Christians persecuted Jews erroneously in the name of Christ. What kind of evil is it that causes human beings to make each other suffer in such

a fashion? The poet's sarcasm further emerges as she insists:

The story is the joke of love;
 I mean, the deeds of love
 Man can perform with intricate perversion
 as with snakes, as with divine assumption.
 I mean, the fascination of
 The crucifix is with us still,
 Making room again and again
 For one more ingenuity.

The human interpretation of Christ's love is here portrayed as something to be "perform[ed]," as if with mirrors, sleight-of-hand, legerdemain. The emphasis is on the "fascination of the crucifix" rather than on Christ's teachings, and the human manifestation is comparable to the way in which so-called primitive religions or superstitions are practiced. Kumin does not make a case here for rational action on the part of human beings, but rather hints at something which is like the magic witch-doctors or charlatans might perform. Her belief in the perversion of Christianity is clear as she insists: "I will not have Christ tricked with my cruelty."

Kumin's cynicism is also revealed through the way in which she speaks of people who would convert the "heathen." Those who "used to stand, / a little shabby and shy, on downtown corners / all winter, message in hand, / hawking Armageddon like licensed pornographers" (H, 61, "The

Waiting Game") now "dread themselves the day the trumpet blows" (H, 61, "The Waiting Game") because "times have changed" and they have "grown fat on fear and hate." Comparing evangelists to pornographers deftly likens these "hawkers" of salvation to "hawkers" of lewd materials.

Another representation of Kumin's sardonic attitude toward Christianity is the poem "The Jesus Infection" (HBFG, 23). One of the "Kentucky poems," (written while Kumin was living briefly in Danville, Kentucky, and which city, she noted, was more exotic and foreign to her than Paris would be)¹⁷ this poem points to the inundation of Christian evangelism and of a Christian presence. Christianity foists itself on her as she drives:

Signposts every mile exhort me
to Get Right With God
and I move over.
There's a neon message blazing
at the crossroad
catty-corner to the Burger Queen:
Ye Come With Me.
Is it well with my soul, Jesus?
It sounds so easy
to be happy after the sunrise,
to be washed in the crimson flood.

Even the Kentucky billboards, casually interspersed with

¹⁷ Hammond, 61.

"Burger Queens"--as well the ubiquitous hymns pouring out of the car radio--implore the poet and any other "heathens" to repent. The garish and intrusive message, underscored in neon, reminds one of signs found in Las Vegas or advertising adult bookstores. Kumin also, rather cynically, points to the superficial abundance of the slogans, as in advertising campaigns. The poem continues:

Now I am tailgating
and I read a bumper sticker
on a Ford truck of Poland Chinas.
It says: Honk If You Know Jesus
and I do it.
My sound blasts out for miles
behind the pigsqueal.

The shallowness of this evangelism is illustrated by the fact that the pleas to convert have now been relegated to bumper stickers--bumper stickers on trucks full of pigs. As the poem concludes, Kumin draws a parallel between this truck of pigs and the biblical story (Matthew 8: 28-34) wherein Christ drives demons into a herd of swine which then rushes over a cliff into the sea and is drowned. The poet aligns herself with the pigs:

We are going down the valley on a hairpin turn,
the swine and me, we're breakneck in
we're leaning on
the everlasting arms.

In this land of pervasive Christianity, perhaps the poet

feels that as a Jew she is regarded as being demonic as she and the swine "go down the valley"--the valley of the shadow of death? Human being and pig have equal chance of being "saved" here as they are "leaning on / the everlasting arms." Noteworthy too is the juxtaposition here of the fact that Jews eschew pork, the fact that the truck Kumin follows is full of pigs, and the allusion to the biblical story of Christ driving the demons into a herd of pigs.

Kumin's cynicism toward religion, particularly Catholicism, is also made clear in "The Ear" (P, 44). This poem relates "a very old story... / which begins in the North End with a drunken father / ...and swells / to the night of the razor which carried away, / cleanly, the spiral top half of his right ear." Ironically lost while drunk, rather than through any sort of martyrdom, the man's severed ear becomes a relic, "blessed on the wall." Tony, the poet's "fruit man," wears a "Christopher medal" and provides fruit for "three convents... / to which he tenders in quantity and at a reverent profit / the best he can bargain at auction for the good sisters." Tony's pioussness takes the form of providing lush, exotic fruits, so that he functions as a would-be serpent in the garden, proffering forbidden fruit.

For the sisters who raise up the young in the way
they

should go;

for the sisters who govern the sick and reign
over women in labor;

for the sisters whose business it is to pray for
us all

below.

Are not the sisters sinful in allowing themselves to break
with their ascetic routine in such a fashion? Kumin
compares the lush fruit to the stern lives of the nuns:

who, having pledged with Christ, ought now to be
faithful

to gristle and narrow beds, recumbent and at ease
instead

inside their habits. For them, bold plums flown
from

Brazil,

kumquats and currants, loosed from their leaves
in the

sun,

Bosc pears and Anjous for them, and small
tangerines that will

slip from their skins at the nick of a nail of a
nun.

The contrast between the fruits--symbolic of bearing fruit,
children--and the chaste, abstemious nuns, is an ironic
one, made more so by the fact that it is Tony of the
"relic" who provides the fruit as a tithing. Tony respects

the sisters "who raise up the young in the way they / should go," even though he, himself, leads a life of drunkenness. Then too, the fruits come from Brazil and other exotic and faraway places, while the world of the nuns is a cloistered and confined one. The "guavas," "pomegranates," "casabas," and "mangoes" Tony brings them are alluded to as corrupting influences that would distract the nuns from their vows of simplicity and denial. Kumin also speaks of them as "being fed by Nubian eunuchs on their knees," almost as if the nuns are Tony's harem. And presiding over the scene of the nuns "dipping red berries in sugar and telling them, / like beads," is "Tony's lost ear, a relic, blessed on the wall." Tony's relic, "carried away" while he was drunk, ironically has invaded the convent.

Kumin writes of perversions of Christ's love ironically in "In The Absence of Bliss" (LA, 38) as well. In this poem she describes how Christ's love has been perverted by imperfect and depraved human beings, so that atrocities committed against Jews go absolutely "unremarked":

The roasting alive of rabbis
in the ardor of the Crusades
went unremarked in "Europe from
the Holy Roman Empire to 1918,"
open without prerequisite
when I was an undergraduate.

Kumin speaks of the doomed "rabbis" as if they were nuts being roasted, thereby underscoring the ease and callousness with which such atrocity was accepted by her college instructor, who did not deem it worth mentioning. Nevertheless there was much suffering as the rabbis died:

While reciting the Sh'ma in full
 expectation that their souls
 would waft up to the bosom
 of the Almighty the rabbis burned,
 pious past the humming extremes
 of pains. And their loved ones with them.
 Whole communities tortured and set aflame
 in Christ's name
 while chanting Hear, O Israel.

Here again one understands why the poet terms the love of Christ "the Jesus infection": some people kill in the name of Christ. To think that such horrid acts could go "unremarked," as if simply not meriting attention, is unconscionable. The way in which this atrocity went unnoticed in Kumin's history course is representative of the way in which history--and the people who write it--have ignored such facts. An essential depravity in human beings that causes them to ignore such evil.

The influence of formalized religion persists throughout Kumin's poetry, overtly in her earlier work, and

more covertly in her later work. As she makes the transition from "infinite change" to "infinite depravity," the poet recognizes a depravity in human beings that formalized religion cannot eradicate, and so she turns to nature to find order and to find some sense of a divine being. While formalized religion taught Kumin to see human beings as perverse, it did not provide solutions to the depravity--salvation--for her. The influence of formalized religion persists in that her childhood training, as well as all of her other religious experiences, has caused her to name herself agnostic, though she is unable to accept totally this stance and so looks to nature for its "dark obedient order" (UC, 21, "Stones").

The poems here identified as belonging to a daughter/mother/daughter continuum, illustrate Kumin's theme of a matrilinear rather than a patrilinear progression in continuing the family and the family name.¹ Reflective certainly of the laws of Judaism that name only the child of a Jewish mother a born Jew (and therefore which place much significance on the mother-child, rather than the father-child link), this concept of ordering the family depends upon a centering on the female rather than on the male lineage.² Perceiving the family as matrilinear

¹ "The most significant dimensions of maternal heritages that offer some answers to...[questions of mothers' heritages and daughters' legacies] are: the nurturing and conveyance of a sense of self; the transmission of human values through mothers who serve, directly or indirectly, as positive or negative role models; and the fostering of a group identity--national, racial, or cultural." (Lynn Z. Bloom, "Heritages: Dimensions of Mother-Daughter Relationships in Women's Autobiographies," in The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature, Cathy N. Davidson and E.M. Broner, eds. (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980): 291.

² Like many other cultures and religions, Judaism traditionally defined the woman's role very rigidly: "Not only were women deemed intellectually inferior to men, they were also not treated as independent, responsible adults in Jewish law.... More importantly, the Jewish laws of marriage and divorce, which originated in the polygamous culture of the ancient Near East, treated women as second-class citizens.... According to the Talmud, a husband

rather than as patrilinear, however, is in contrast to western civilization's more common tradition that the family name is carried on by sons and consequently that male children are more valued by many--a significant number of couples wish their first child to be a boy. Then too, the male Orthodox Jew prays daily: "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe who has not made me a woman" (while the corresponding prayer for a female reads, "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe who has made me according to Thy will")³--this from men whose children will not be considered fully Jewish unless their mother is Jewish.⁴ Certainly there is paradox and ambiguity about the Jewish concept of matrilineage. Kumin, born a Jew, raised in Catholic schools, and living in a Protestant society, finds the idea of matrilineage compelling, and much of her poetry is directed toward rectifying these opposing ideas. To think of the family as

could divorce his wife if she burned his soup--though frivolous divorce was not encouraged--while an unhappy wife who came to the prominent Rabbi Judah, a second-century sage, to complain of her situation and petition that her husband be compelled to divorce her was told, 'Why are you different from a fish? You have no more right to complain against your husband's treatment than a fish has the right to object to the manner in which it has been cooked.'" For further discussion see Charlotte Baum, et al. The Jewish Woman in America. New York: The Dial Press, 1976: 3-16.

³ Quoted in Gail B. Shulman, "View From the Back of the Synagogue: Women in Judaism," Sexist Religion and Women in the Church, ed. Alice L. Hageman (New York: Association Press, 1974): 147.

⁴ Baum, 5.

matrilinear is to place oneself at odds with majority beliefs.⁵

Kumin's poetry celebrates the continuum of the family as reflected in mothers, and particularly as manifested in the daughter/mother/daughter chain.⁶ While the woman replicates the family through all of her children, it is through her daughters, in particular, that she continues the family and thereby continues herself. There is a special connection between mothers and daughters in the family continuum because it is they who are life-givers:

⁵ Gwen Kennedy Neville, in her "Religious Socialization of Women Within U.S. Subcultures" (in Sexist Religion and Women in the Church, ed. Alice L. Hageman (New York: Association Press, 1974)) notes that: "there is a strong tendency in [all major subcultural groups in the United States] to emphasize the centrality of the mother in transmitting the cultural heritage. This is pronounced in the Jewish family and...it is apparent from the data that the central role of mother as socializer is shared by the major European traditions.... It is this pivotal role of mother as tradition maintainer within religious subcultures that makes the tightly knit groups resistant to social change in women's roles" (p. 88).

⁶ In her introduction to a collection of journals by women writers, editor Lyn Lifshin observes that the journals show an obsession with the mother: "I came to realize [this theme] is one of the most haunting, persistent presences: the guilts, the ambivalences, the closeness, the desire to please and the feeling one never can. Dreams of the mother's death recurred; many entries analyzed the relationship after her actual death.... Mothers writing about their children showed a similar ambivalence, a feeling of being fragmented (a word that recurs throughout the diaries) and of giving and giving to children, husbands, and lovers till there is nothing of self left, this linked with terror of loss or abandonment. Several show love and fear of something happening to their children... (Lyn Lifshin, ed., Ariadne's Thread: A Collection of Contemporary Women's Journals (New York: Harper & Row, 1982): 4).

they birth and nurture the children.⁷ Adrienne Rich maintains that:

Mothers and daughters have always exchanged with each other--beyond the verbally transmitted lore of female survival--a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, preverbal: the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other.⁸

In Kumin's poetry one finds many references to "the chain of daughters" (LA, 5, "The Chain") and to the chain of mothers. The mother-daughter relationship never ceases; even when a woman becomes a mother, still she remains a daughter, and even after the death of her mother, their relationship, internalized by the daughter, continues.

Although the daughter-role is often rather vaguely defined, the mother-role certainly is comprised of many qualities or characteristics. The American notion of the mother-role is one that is fraught with emotion and that has become so complex and demanding that it has achieved a mythic status:

⁷ Koolish observes that the "identification that a mother feels with her child has an almost transcendent force, as it exists both in women's poetry and in their lives. In an article in Women, Culture and Society, sociologist Nancy Chodorow explores this phenomenon: 'The experience of mothering for a woman involves a double identification. A woman identifies with her own mother and, through identification with her child, she (re)experiences herself as a cared-for child.'" (p. 243)

⁸ Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986): 221.

We have been so acculturated to the idea that all babies trail clouds of glory, that all children are bright-eyed and clean-souled, that all mothers are self-possessed, sweet-tempered, and smell of new-made bread that until the rebirth of feminism and the population explosion lifted the veils from our eyes, we simply misread or ignored what literature had been telling us all along about the highly various, deeply complex, intensely rewarding and difficult relationships between mothers and children.⁹

Customary/traditional mother-role characteristics include: life-giver, nurturer, feeder, teacher (values, rituals, behavior, mores, sexuality), guide (both spiritual and physical life), protector, role-model, comforter, caretaker, self-sacrificer and muse. This complex set of characteristics could be said to describe the ideal of American motherhood.¹⁰ Achieving mere competency in all of

⁹ Janice H. Harris. "Our Mute, Inglorious Mothers." Midwest Quarterly 16 (Spring 1975): 245.

¹⁰ Sylvia Ann Hewlett's A Lesser Life, The Myth of Women's Liberation in America (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1986) treats the "cult of motherhood" which reached fruition in the 1950's--the time during which Kumin became a mother--and which continues to plague women: "To be a good mother in the fifties was a role that knew no bounds, as mothers became personally responsible for the psychological and cognitive development of their children. On the psychic front mothers were burdened with the fearful knowledge that only they stood between their child growing up to be normal or growing up to be a neurotic, screwed-up adult. On the cognitive front the postwar American mother was handed both a challenge and a threat. She was told,

these areas is nearly impossible for fallibly-human beings, but the myth of the mother-role considers unfit or seriously lacking she who does not perform the magnitude of these tasks and perform them well. Therefore, a noteworthy aspect of the image of mothers and daughters in Kumin's poetry is that it is an honest one; despite the evident strong love for her daughters in her work, the poet acknowledges herself "all uncertainties / ...in this mothering business" (RS, 38, "Sunbathing on a Rooftop in Berkeley"). The relationship between mothers and their children is quite complicated. In addition to love, there are feelings of anger, resentment, and frustration--to name just three--that are also part of the mother-daughter relationship as conflicts arise over dependency and autonomy, for example. Rich observes that the

cathexis between mother and daughter--essential, distorted, misused--is the great unwritten story. Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of whom has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other. The materials here are for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement.

'You have the capacity to rear a genius, a masterpiece,' but it was also clear that if this child failed to live up to his or her potential, it was very definitely the mother's fault" (p. 228).

Margaret Mead offers the possibility of 'deep biochemical affinities between the mother and the female child, and contrasts between the mother and the male child, of which we now know nothing.' Yet this relationship has been minimized and trivialized in the annals of patriarchy. Whether in theological doctrine or art or sociology or psychoanalytic theory, it is the mother and son who appear as the eternal, determinative dyad.¹¹

The theme of the daughter/mother/daughter continuum in Kumin's poetry makes it clear that these emotions, struggles, and conflicts are inherent in such relationships and as such are part of the rites of passage, part of the life-cycle.¹²

The importance of the mother-daughter relationship appears often throughout Kumin's work and in various ways. Christ details just how crucial the mother/daughter relationship is: "Because the relation between mother and daughter is central in the formation of woman's image of self, exploring it forces a woman to plumb the deepest levels of her experience."¹³ Among the ways that this

¹¹ Rich, Of Woman Born, 225-6.

¹² The concern with the mother-daughter relationship is evident in the poetry of many contemporary female poets--Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath, Diane Wakoski, Anne Sexton, and Denise Levertov, among others.

¹³ Christ, Diving Deep..., 63.

theme appears in Kumin's work is the idea that "we carry our mothers forth" (RS, 40, "The Envelope"); their influence is never-ending and ubiquitous, continuing even after their deaths so that they return to us:

It is true that our mothers explode
out of the snowballs of dreams
or speak to us down the chimney
saying our names above the wind

or scrape their legs like crickets
in the dead grass behind the toolshed
tapping a code we can't read.

(HBFG, 3, "History Lesson")

Our mothers' influence is so pervasive, in fact, that otherwise insignificant noises and acts can call them forth. In their physical absence they "tap a code we can't read," remaining elusive.

In addition to the fact that our bonds with our mothers are never-ending--we eventually internalize them and continue them--in looking at this relationship one must think in terms of life-cycles inherent in the daughter/mother/daughter continuum. In seeing oneself as part of a continuum, for example, one must understand that there is not only continuum for the whole (the family, the chain) but also the inevitability of death for its parts,

the individuals.¹⁴ While a mother achieves a certain immortality in being carried forth by her daughters--her influence and her genes continuing her--her physical self will cease to exist at a certain point; the daughter/mother/daughter continuum offers some hope in light of the inevitability of death.

Another aspect of the life-cycle is that a female child is "born" several times. First, her mother literally gives birth to her; next, she undergoes another birth as she becomes a woman; and finally, as she births her first child, she also births herself, so to speak, as a mother. So the progression for most daughters is from child to woman to mother. However, even after she herself becomes a mother, a woman is always a daughter, always someone's child. Kumin recognizes the perseverance of this role as she observes that her daughter is now grown; however, this fact "does not prevent my caring with secret frenzy / about this woman, this child no longer a child" (GT, 19, "Leaving

¹⁴ Sandra M. Gilbert comments that "to the extent that pregnancy depersonalizes the woman, freeing her from her own ego and instead enslaving her to the species, it draws her backward into her own past (the germplasm she shelters belongs to her parents and ancestors as well as to her). 'Caught up in the great cycle of the species, she affirms life in the teeth of time and death,' says de Beauvoir. 'In this she glimpses immortality; but in her flesh she feels the truth of Hegel's words: 'the birth of children is the death of parents.''" To Plath [as well as Kumin] this network backwards and forwards was clearly of immense importance." (Sandra M. Gilbert, "A Fine White Flying Myth: The Life/Work of Sylvia Plath," in Shakespeare's Sisters, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979): 257.)

My Daughter's House"). Paradoxically, though her daughter is no longer a child, she will always be her mother's child, despite the relinquishing on the mother's part, and despite the inevitable and necessary growing-apart of mother and adult child.

Regardless of what else they become, daughters remain daughters. Kumin recognizes this about her own mother upon looking at a photograph of her young as-yet-childless mother: "Here's Mother in [her husband's Stanley Steamer] / going for a whirl. / Her hair spins out like cobwebs, coasting down / Wayne Hill, a silly Gibson girl, / all sugar and spice with a terribly tiny waist" (P, 20, "The Album"). As this photograph symbolizes, Kumin's mother will remain a daughter even after the "terribly tiny waist" succumbs to childbirth. She will not cease to be a daughter as she herself becomes a mother.

I. The daughter/mother/daughter continuum begins with the poet's mother, with whom she had a troubled relationship (as suggested in the poems) and whose influence, though she is now dead, continues in a number of ways in the poet's life. Her mother's influence is clear as the poet comments:

I have lain
on this thorn thirty years,
spinning out of my

pear-shaped belly,
 my puffball pearl-gray belly
 always perfectly damp,
 intricate maps of my brainpan,
 lines and ligatures
 that catch the morning light
 and carve it into prisms;
 you might say, messages.

(P, 37, "A Voice From the Roses")

This "thorn," perhaps the pain and anguish caused by her relationship with her mother, has led the poet to "spin...messages": poems. The relationship with her mother becomes transmuted into a creative force that transforms it into metaphor--to "spin," to create "prisms" and "messages." Symbolically Kumin's creative capacity is reflected in the "pear-shaped belly"--a symbol of fertility--and in the "pearl-gray belly / always perfectly damp." Here "pearl" suggests something beautiful, round, and polished, rather than being the gray of decay or ugliness. This presence of beauty is reinforced by the "perfectly damp belly," which suggests a sort of living Petri dish, ready to nourish and to give life. Functioning as muse here, the poet's mother provides the "thorn," the impetus for the poet's creativity.

Kumin endows her mother with much power in "The Spell" (P, 10). She describes her mother's garden, symbolic of the power she believes her mother to have--power so great

that she is able to control nature, to bend it to her will:

She scolds the common blue flags for putting up
spears.

In rough gloves she wrestles the roses,
at suppertime hauls in the sun.

The violets cease their invasion now as she
passes.

Bees in mid-air turn to mind her;
they enter the Japanese quince.

It is she who infuses the ginko, now I can see
it.

It is she who leans down to Jesus's blossoms,
wherefore they know their limits.

And all of the souls in the ivy
pulse, sending, receiving in code,
listen, tattle, and listen.

It is she who speaks to the toads.

This powerful woman can control nature: this witch casts
her "spell" over this garden, ordering it exactly as she
wishes.¹⁵ Kumin re-creates her mother's power by carefully

¹⁵ Levertov's poems about her mother in Life in the Forest (New York: New Directions, 1978)--"The 90th Year," "A Daughter (I)," "A Daughter (II)," and "Death in Mexico"--similarly employ garden imagery in discussion of the poet's mother. Levertov's poems display the grief which she feels over her mother's death; the garden imagery underscores the mother's power in being able to wrest order from the wilderness--control over nature--only to have the wilderness encroach as the mother dies. Levertov's employment of the third person in these poems is particularly interesting, because it would seem that she distances herself with this technique much in the same way

choosing the verbs she uses in conjunction with her mother, who "scolds," "wrestles," "hauls," "infuses," "leans," and "speaks." Additionally, "bees...turn to mind her," "violets cease their invasion...as she passes," and the "souls in the ivy / pulse, sending, receiving in code, / listen, tattle, listen." The poet's mother animates the things around her, causing them to react and to respond to her presence. Her power is such that she "leans down to Jesus's blossoms, / wherefore they know their limits." Kumin imbues her mother with such power in this poem that the woman becomes a witch-like/god-like force capable of controlling nature and of doing battle with the gods--she is certainly more than a human being here. In her world, the world of the garden, she approaches the all-powerful.

Evidence of her mother's power and importance, the poet's relationship with her mother continues to haunt her. At an early age Kumin feels that she "disappoint[s] [her] mother" (HBFG, 5, "The Thirties Revisited"). She will spend most of her life trying to come to terms with and rectify this relationship. As an adult, for instance, the poet recognizes, while waiting for her flight to depart (as innocuous and as random a situation as that): "Wherever we're going / is Monday morning. / Wherever we're coming from / is Mother's lap" (GT, 3, "Our Ground Time Here Will

that Kumin implements a strict formal structure when she feels overwhelmed by the subject matter. Kumin observes, for example, that she uses form at times "as a defense between [herself] and the material" (Meek, 27).

Be Brief"). Our mothers are with us into and throughout adulthood.

Significantly, the poet begins to come to the realization at one point in her life, that her mother's role in life was pre-determined to some extent and not entirely of her own making. Consequently, she begins to draw comparisons between her mother and herself, in the process coming to a reconciliation or a resolution of her feelings for her mother. In "Life's Work" (HBFG, 17) Kumin recognizes the similarities between herself and her mother. Here too she realizes that much of her mother's life was controlled by others, chiefly her mother's father. Kumin remembers the story of her mother "fresh out of the Conservatory / at eighteen a Bach specialist:

begging permission to go on tour
 with the nimble violinist you were
 never to accompany and he
 flinging his music down
 the rosin from his bow
 flaking line by line
 like grace notes on the treble clef
 and my grandfather
 that estimable man I never met
 scrubbing your mouth with a handkerchief
 saying no daughter of mine
 tearing loose the gold locket
 you wore with no one's picture in it

and the whole German house on 15th Street
at righteous whiteheat...

The violence her grandfather used against Kumin's mother is strengthened by the word choice in this segment. The poet describes her grandfather's "scrubbing," and "tearing," whipping the household into a frenzy of "righteous whiteheat." Given this violent and vigorous denial of her mother's desire to "tour / with the nimble violinist," one wonders how her life would have been different had she had a different father; the poet invites speculation as she looks back on her mother's life, examining its details with an attitude of foregone conclusion.

From an analysis of these details (life-altering and tumultuous as they were), the poet moves to a study of the way her father reacted in a somewhat similar situation:

At eighteen I chose to be a swimmer.
My long hair dripped through dinner
onto the china plate.
My fingers wrinkled like Sunsweet
yellow raisins from the afternoon workout.
My mouth chewed but I was doing laps.
I entered the water like a knife....
I swallowed and prayed
to be allowed to join the Aquacade
and my perfect daddy...
my daddy wearing gravy on his face
swore on the carrots and the boiled beef

that I would come to nothing

that I would come to grief....

The poet's less violent father is similarly damning as he speaks her fate. Even at the time, however, Kumin knew that his predictions would not come true, for he has "gravy on his face," akin to "egg on his face." Although understated, the poet's pain is evident here as she describes her total involvement with the water, and the reader comes to realize what joining the Aquacade must have meant to her.

In the third stanza the poet culminates her observations in the drawing of similarities between her mother and herself; as she verifies that "the firm old fathers are dead / [and she] didn't come to grief," she remembers her mother:

the stairs speak again under your foot
 the heavy parlor door folds shut
 and "Au Clair de la Lune"
 puckers from the obedient keys
 plain as a schoolroom clock ticking
 and what I hear more clearly than Debussy's
 lovesong is the dry aftersound
 of your nails clicking.

With more than a little satisfaction, the poet notes that she didn't fulfill her father's prophecy. Instead, she became a poet--and a successful one at that. She has proved the disapproving "firm old fathers" wrong. She has

not, however, joined the Aquacade, nor has she become an olympic swimmer, but instead she swims alone, for personal satisfaction. In the same way her mother, during "the midnights of [the poet's] childhood" and behind the closed "heavy parlor door," played the piano alone. Her "long nails click[ed]" dryly as she played: this description suggesting that her mother's musical life has somehow died or is devoid of inspiration in that it is now dry--implying an arid or stagnating state--and the "long nails clicking" suggest something dead, in the way that nails seemingly continue to grown past human death. Above the sound of the music, Kumin remembers the sound of her mother's nails. A pianist with long nails is likely no longer a serious player. So the poet begins to recognize the similarities between her mother and herself; each of them has suffered disappointments and has had her personal history altered by the intervention of outside forces: their fathers.¹⁶

In coming to terms with her relationship to her mother, the poet-daughter reaches the understanding that she will forever internalize her mother: "we carry around

¹⁶ Kumin begins to see similarities between herself and her mother as she perceives her mother as fellow victim of her own father. This shift in attitude is crucial; once Kumin sees her mother as fellow victim rather than total villain, thereby maturing by suffering in the same way that her mother has, "once this awareness is reached [she] effects a reconciliation with [her] mother which enables her to achieve some productive action." (Natalie M. Rosinsky, "Mothers and Daughters: Another Minority Group," in The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature, Cathy N. Davidson and E.M. Broner, eds. (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980): 285-6.

our mothers. But mine is dead" (NF, 55, "A Family Man"). Here, what is literally being referred to is a snapshot, but more than that, there is the realization that the relationship with one's mother continues past her physical death: as long as the daughter is alive, the mother-daughter relationship is alive: "I carry / the ghost of my mother under my navel, a nervy / little androgynous person, a miracle / folded in lotus position" (RS, 40, "The Envelope"). Jacqueline and Laura Berke quote psychologist Erich Fromm, who

has said of the child that he must grow until he becomes his own father. Presumably we may extrapolate from this that the girl-child similarly must grow until she becomes her own mother. This metaphor [is]...highly suggestive of what the maturation process is all about...¹⁷

Similarly, Anne Sexton's poem "Housewife" asserts that "A woman is her mother. / That's the main thing."¹⁸

In the poem "February" (GT, 21) Kumin addresses her now-dead mother, recalling her death, seemingly speaking with her mother, thereby retrieving her. Working in February on her farm, the poet thinks of her mother:

¹⁷ Jacqueline Berke and Laura Berke, "Mothers and Daughters in Wives and Daughters: A Study of Elizabeth Gaskell's Last Novel," in The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature, Cathy N. Davidson and E.M. Broner, eds. (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980): 95.

¹⁸ Anne Sexton, "Housewife," All My Pretty Ones, in The Complete Poems (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981): 77.

remembering how you won
the death you wished for
the death you sidled up to
remembering how

like a child in late afternoon
drained from the jubilant sledding
you were content to coast
the run-out to a stop

A radical departure from a stance of grief, and in contrast to most poetry about parental death, this poem rejoices in the fact that the death was not painful or complicated, so that:

booted and capped in the barn
joy enters where I haul
a hay bale by its binding string
and with my free hand pull
your easy death along.

Death is sometimes to be welcomed, especially when the transition is a relatively painless one. This conversation with, this poem addressed to, her mother, makes it clear that the poet's relationship with her, though now internalized, continues.

As the poet-daughter subsumes her mother and as she realizes that her relationship with her mother will be never-ending, she moves from anger and resentment (although such emotions will always be present) to understanding.

With time the pain has muted so that compassion and forgiveness (also prompted by the recognition of similarities between her mother and herself) are now possible. She also recognizes, as does Adrienne Rich, that she will continually seek

"to return to her mother, to repossess her and be repossessed by her, to find the mutual confirmation from and with another woman that daughters and mothers alike hunger for, pull away from, make possible or impossible for each other. The first knowledge any woman has of warmth, nourishment, tenderness, security, sensuality, mutuality, comes from her mother. That earliest enwrapment of one female body with another can sooner or later be denied or rejected, felt as choking possessiveness, as rejection, trap, or taboo; but it is, at the beginning, the whole world¹⁹

While Kumin still feels that "my mother directed the craft / of her vengeance against me" (P, 37, "A Voice From The Roses"), she also believes:

The furious barbs
that I fed with my body's juices,
this nib of my babyhood
has softened, as even saliva

¹⁹ Rich, Of Woman Born, 218.

will eat away porcelain.
 Tugged this way and that
 by the force of my spinning,
 the old thorn
 now clasps me lightly.

She has been able to fight her way free of her mother's power--to some extent so that the "furious barb / ...has softened." In some ways this is the furious barb of anger she has been nurturing for many years against her mother.²⁰ But she is now in the process of reconciliation with her mother, though realizing that even though "the old thorn / now clasps me lightly"; like the catch on a chain, she is held fast by the relationship:

Nevertheless
 it is rooted. It is
 raising a tree inside me.
 The birds of my mother's arbor
 grow ripe in my sex.

The painful reality of the poet's relationship with her mother has been partially muted yet it remains. Indicative of the way in which the relationship between them--and its accompanying pain--is permanent, the "thorn" becomes a "tree," a more substantial and persevering image than that of a "thorn." And as "the buds of my mother's

²⁰ Susan Allen Toth asserts that "maternal love is a frightening force in Kumin's work, an inextricable mixture of intense love and pain. It charges most of her novels as well as her poetry...." (p. 35)

arbor / grow ripe in my sex," so too does the poet continue her mother, in addition to herself as she births her own daughters, "the buds" which will reach fruition through "her sex," the poet's mother reaching beyond her daughter to her granddaughters.

II. In adding the role of mother to her role as daughter, the poet moves into another part of the continuum. First she becomes a woman, birthing herself into a woman--in a sense--as with a real birth, her body is a "surprise" (HBFG, 5, "The Thirties Revisited"); most literal births are surprises in that they are unpredictable. Also in this poem, one surmises that the girl was less than prepared for the onset of menstruation, that loss of innocence "when my body, that surprise, / claps me into my first blood" (HBFG, 5, "The Thirties Revisited"). Left to herself to discover any more than rudimentary knowledge of menstruation and sexuality, she wonders: "Why does the mattress moan at night / and why is nothing good / said of all the business to come / --the elastic belt with its metal tongue--" (HBFG, 5, "The Thirties Revisited"). The girl undergoes the rites of passage which make her a woman only to find that the passage is lonely, fraught with mystery and surprise: "the elastic belt with its metal tongue"--a sanitary belt--also

sounds ominously also like either an instrument of torture or some sort of lascivious voyeur.

Transition in the continuum occurs again as the poet becomes the mother of daughters. Having daughters delights the poet, and in several poems she:

records her perpetual astonishment at her good fortune in having had daughters. In addition to the esthetic and emotional pleasure they provide, she feels agreeably improved on by them.²¹

While written as if from a male perspective, "Father's Song" (NF, 47), encompasses the feelings of the mother as well: indeed Kumin herself acknowledges: "although the persona is that of the male parent, the feeling tone clearly is shared with the mother."²² The poem praises daughters, drawing a contrast between sons and daughters:

But in praise of daughters first there is
the matter of their comeliness,
the whole sweet smell of the house that holds
them,
the tropic disorder they bring,
the bright sherbet of their underwear dripdrying
and the cargo of their redemptive creams
that stain the bathroom porcelain
with the ooze of crushed flowers.

²¹ Prairie, 123.

²² Prairie, 117.

In praise of daughters!

This world of daughters is exotic and fragrant, with their "tropic disorder," "sweet smells," and "bright sherbet" that surround them as if they were exotic perfumes or ice cream. The fragrance and bright colors suggest flowering, as, indeed, the daughters symbolize the promise of new life as well as carrying forth their mothers into the continuum. Like their mothers before them, daughters become life-givers. The structure of this poem enhances the tone of thanksgiving throughout. Beginning each line with "the" and providing a catalogue of colorful, scent-evoking images, Kumin creates a psalm of praise; the daughters seem more a rain forest than mere human beings in their colorful fecundity.

Continuing her implementation of colorful images in conjunction with her daughters, Kumin uses the family cat, named Rosencrantz, to symbolize the concept of daughter-as-life-giver:

[Rosencrantz] chose your open drawer of lollipop
 pants,
 that cotton jumble of fruit-flavor drops,
 for her first litter. She brought each forth
 in a purple bubble, and ate up all the afterbirth
 leaving only a damp stain in the shape
 of a splayed-out frog on the top pair. Lime.
 (HBFG, 28, "The Knot")

The cat gives birth in the daughter's underwear drawer

(lollipop brand, at least at one time, geared to a teenage market), symbolically the property of one who will herself become life-giver soon. "Lollipop" and "Fruit-flavor drops" here indicate the possibility of fruition and vitality, and being terms for candy, they also suggest the youth of the pants' owner. Additionally, because the "lollipop pants" obviously cover the sexual organs of the daughter, they are also representative of the fecundity and ripening of the daughter; the daughter will soon take up the task of carrying on the continuum.

As the daughters take on the role of life-giver, the mother eventually relinquishing this capacity, they also will continue their mother's essence, carrying her, in part, on to virtual immortality. The poet realizes that she will persevere through her children; certain of her traits/genes/characteristics/habits will be borne on into the future by her children: "my pulse knit in your wrist / expands. Go now and spend it" (H, 80, "Poem For My Son"). The life-force within the poet will be carried on through her son, and through her daughters as well. Kumin continues this theme in "The Envelope" (RS, 40), as she uses the image of Russian nesting dolls to illustrate the way in which her daughters will keep her forever living:

It is true, Martin Heidigger, as you have written,

'I fear to cease,' even knowing that at the hour of my death my daughters will absorb me, even

knowing they will carry me about forever
inside them, an arrested fetus...

Daughters repeating their mothers, in an endless
repetition, the cycle will continue:

Like those old pear-shaped Russian dolls that
open
at the middle to reveal another and another, down
to the pea-sized, irreducible minum,
may we carry our mothers forth in our bellies.
May 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 their lives.

Though her daughters cause the poet to hope for a type
of immortality, they also cause her to realize her
mortality. Through her progeny, she will achieve a type of
immortality, even though her physical self will die. For
if the family is a continuum, it is also a foregone
conclusion as one generation gives way to the next, running
its common course of births, marriages, deaths--childhood,
adolescence, parenthood. As one generation is born, so
another ages and dies. As her daughters mature into the
young womanhood the poet no longer knows, she senses her
death approaching. The life-cycle must continue:

The bedclothes drown in blood
for these will be women. They will lie down
with lovers, they will cry out giving birth

they will grow old with hard knuckles and dry
necks.

Death will punish them with subtractions.

They will burn me and put me into the earth.

(NF, 47, "Father's Song")

The daughters' fates are clear: they will follow the same life-path as their mother has followed. As the daughters continue through the life-cycle, their mother precedes them: "they will burn me and put me into the earth." Her death is certain--death too is a foregone conclusion. The only uncertainty is the time of its occurrence, a matter over which one has little control, a matter subject to "the random clock of the universe" (H, 91, "One Dead Friend"). Moreover, death is sly, appearing even in the sexual act:

Women have lain

all night with corpses, I have heard,
and raised awake at morning to
cold stone on their flanks,
so fleetly death can slip
invention in...

(H, 35, "Your Living Head")

Death pervades even the act of creation, reminding the poet of her mortality. "Death is in / the first touch, sealing the contract" (H, 43, "The Rites"), so that even as the sexual act begins and the child is created, so too does that child--from its very moment of conception--begin its

journey toward death.²³ And as the child will surely die, so will the parents, most likely, precede the child in death.

In addition to realizing the inevitability of her own death as her daughters proceed on their life-journeys, the poet also recognizes that her daughters too will someday die: "O summers without end, the truth is / no matter how I love her, Death / blew up my dress that day / while she was in the egg unconsidered" (RS, 38, "Sunbathing on a Rooftop in Berkeley"). Even prior to her conception, the daughter's death has been inevitable. Despite the intensity of the mother's love for her child, she can do nothing to prevent the child's eventual death. From the moment of conception as "death / blew up [her mother's] dress," the child began her journey toward her death--even as she was yet in the womb. She must follow a life-cycle, a pre-ordained plan, and one which includes certain death.

More than death, of course, life cycles also include many other rites of passage. When the poet first becomes a mother, for example, she does not know how to care for the child either physically or emotionally. Later, an experienced grandmother, Kumin comforts her six-day-old

²³ Similarly, Annette Kolodny observes that Sylvia Plath presents babies, "traditionally a symbol of woman's fulfillment and new life, as instruments and harbingers of death (Annette Kolodny, "Some Notes on Defining a Feminist Literary Criticism," in Feminist Literary Criticism, ed. Cheryl L. Brown and Karen Olson (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1978): 43.

grandchild as memories of herself as a new mother assail her:

and I am a young unsure mother again
 stiffly clutching the twelve-limbed raw
 creature that broke from between my legs, that
 stew
 of bone and membrane loosely sewn up in
 a fierce scared flailing other being.

(LA, 12, "Grandchild")

In contrast to the mythic image of the new mother smiling beatifically at her new infant, this image of the poet as new mother shows an alienation from and an awkwardness toward this twelve-limbed creature who seems quite alien. The role of mother is one into which a woman grows; she is seldom instantly imbued with knowledge at the first child's birth. In describing a new mother in such a fashion, Kumin draws attention to the fact that the mother and child are separate creatures and as such will always be somewhat alienated from each other. With alienation everpresent, there will be uncertainty on the mother's part as to how to fulfill the role of "mother." The poet will continue to be "all uncertainties, / ...in this mothering business" (RS, 38, "Sunbathing on a Rooftop in Berkeley"). No one writes a script for a mother-child, mother-daughter relationship; the honest among us will admit that the myth of the perfect mother, sure in her perfection, is indeed a myth.

The aspect of estrangement between mother-daughter also concerns Kumin; because mother and daughter are, indeed, separate beings, the mother is estranged, in part, from the child, from she who grew within her and to whom she gave birth. Consequently, she realizes the limitations of her capacity to affect her children's lives. Her children must now operate independently of her: "You bobbed in my flanks. / They cut you from my sea. / Now you must mind your way" (H, 80, "Poem For My Son"). The separation between mother and child is poignantly described as the mother seeks to comfort her child after a nightmare:

This dwelt in me who does not know me now,
Where in her labyrinth I cannot follow,
Advance to be recognized, displace her terror;
I hold my heartbeat on my lap and cannot comfort
her.

Tonight she is condemned to cry out wolf
Or werewolf, and it echoes in the gulf
And no one comes to cradle cold Narcissus;
The first cell that divided separates us.

(H, 52, "Nightmare")

The most intimate of bonds has been severed; even before the child has been birthed and is no longer physically housed within her mother, she is not within her mother's control. The child, the self-absorbed "Narcissus," is on her own; there is no other choice, for the child is a separate being, as the poet realizes: "the first cell that

divided separates us." Interestingly, one can draw parallels between the diction used here and the diction in Emily Dickinson's "after great pain a formal feeling comes."²⁴ The word order and tone of the first line, for example, emphasize a pain so immense that a formality or frighteningly-pervasive calm must prevail in/after its presence. Such perhaps is the nature of the initial realization of how alienated one can be from even one's own child.

The irony of this alienation between mother and child is manifested also as the poet looks at a photograph of her child and reflects on the preordained estrangement between them:

Body that housed you, but now claims no right
except in this snapshot on the window ledge
of a borrowed parlor where a diamond bit
the glass to save a man's name from the dark.
It's last summer in this picture, a day on the
edge
of our time zone. We are standing in the park,
our genes declare themselves, death smiles in the
sun
streaking the treetops, the sky all
lightstruck....

²⁴ Emily Dickinson. The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1960: 162.

In the dark you were packed about with toys,
 you were sleeping on your knees, never alone
 your breathing making little o's
 of trust, night smooth as soapstone
 and the hump of your bottom like risen bread....

I chew on the knot
 we were once. Meanwhile, your eyes, serene
 in the photo, look most thoughtfully out
 and could be bullet holes, or beauty spots.
 (HBFG, 27, "The Knot")

Here, the poet laments the dissolution of "the knot we were once"--the bonds which once existed between mother and daughter which have weakened from the very day of her birth. The irony of the separation and estrangement of the relationship is underscored by the phrase "body that housed you," describing the daughter as more a previous tenant than fetus. This phrase underscores the irony of the fact that the mother--once intimately and physically connected to the child, it literally a part of her--has neither the right nor the ability to control her daughter's life. The mother must let go. And this struggle between mother and daughter, dependency and autonomy, is reflected in the poet's symbolizing her daughter's eyes, as they regard her mother from the photo (and consequently, perhaps, pronounce judgement) as either "bullet holes, or beauty spots"--perhaps both.

The separation of mother and child, inevitable and natural as it is, also takes place as the daughters become women and begin to pursue fates (or, indeed, continue to follow them) separate from their mother's. The poet-mother therefore loses her daughters as they grow up, as they become women, and as they move away. The poet plaintively inquires of the angels, termed "God's secret agents" by Billy Graham:

Angels, where were you when...
 my black-eyed susan-child ran
 off with her European lover
 and has been ever since an unbelonger,
 were you whirling over
 the suitcases? Did you put
 your imprimatur on
 that death-by-separation?

(RS, 7, "Address to the Angels")

While daughters must follow their own destinies, this foregone conclusion and natural part of the life-cycle is one that is nonetheless painful for the mothers. The separation is pre-ordained, as the poet elucidates, forgetting the separation temporarily as she holds her new grandchild and is therefore reminded of herself as a brand-new mother:

I stand at the window
 watching the ancient boundaries that flow
 between my daughter's life and mine dissolve

like taffy pulled until it melts in half
 without announcing any point of strain
 and I am a young unsure mother again.

(LA, 12, "Grandchild")

The "ancient boundaries," of necessity so firmly in place, are manifestations of the ways in which mothers and daughters must find their own way, becoming separate and autonomous beings.

III. The daughter/mother/daughter continuum is sustained as the poet's daughters take their place in the chain. As their lives progress, and as they follow their own life-cycles, the daughters realize that they too have a niche to fill in the family. As the poet "was born into / [her] mother's bed" (H, 16, "Halfway")--the phrase suggesting the upbraiding: "you've made your bed, now lie in it"--they will have pre-ordained paths to follow, in terms of family history, although they may choose their own paths in other ways. But genes and family history dictate a given route through life and the poet's daughters must now take their place within the continuum.

The natural order that must occur as daughters grow and take their place within the continuum is described in "The Fairest One Of All" (NF, 45), addressed to the poet's daughter Jane. This poem celebrates the beauty of the poet's daughter, detailing the way the world should receive

this "fair" daughter:

Pirouettes of you are in order.
 There ought to be slithers of satin
 and diamonds buckled to your ears
 and gold ropes cunningly knotted
 under your breasts. A series of mirrors
 ought to repeat your bare shoulders
 while someone quite gravely
 sprinkles rosin on the parquet floor
 and the orchestra adjusts itself
 to one violin's clear A.
 Outside the casement windows
 a late snow could set about filling
 birds' nests, bee cells and the tines
 of apple trees. If there are horses
 now let them draw troikas
 with bells made of brass to speak harshly
 and let the middle-aged queen rap
 asking her question.
 All this ought to befall.

This charmed, rococo, fairy-tale-like description--
 reminiscent of a debutantes' ball--contrasts with the real
 daughter who stands ironing:

in a room smelling of oranges and sweat
 the upstairs spare room you live in
 when you come home to visit.
 You stand here ironing among the suitcases

the jodhpurs, tampons, ski boots
 among the A.A. Milne, the dust-freckled
 glass animals and the one-eyed fake bear rug.

In comparing her working, ironing daughter to the fantasy daughter, the vision presented is of a Cinderella in a before and after pose--the poet functioning as a fairy godmother through her words. For she can even turn her daughter into a tree:

Ironing in sunlight you put me
 in mind of an aspen in August
 all silverbacked leaf hands, slicking
 one seam from wrist to shoulder
 parting nine pleats with the hot metal nose
 and closing them crisp as a lettuce cup.
 You stand in an acre of whiteness
 a sweet bending tree, a popple
 with hands that kiss, smack, fold, tuck.

The precision and beauty of the daughter's movements and the comeliness of her appearance as she irons in sunlight (during the "full bloom" of her youth, in full sunlight) remind her mother of an extraordinarily beautiful tree. Despite the fact that the daughter is not performing "pirouettes" on a fantasy stage, she performs a ballet for one, so to speak, as her mother watches her gracefully iron, precise and smooth in her movements and as beautiful to watch as a dancer. In a journal entry Kumin provides a stream-of-consciousness detailing of her feelings upon

watching her daughter iron:

i sit...today while the queen, resplendently
lively & radiant as ever, even in old corduroys &
a borrowed shirt, her black hair hung over one
shoulder in a braid...stands at the ironing
board & hums & chats as she slicks expertly along
the sleeve of a blouse, the gores of a skirt.
slick, zip, flat, fold: such competence! such
serenity! how i admire her lissome grace & her
deftness, inherited not from me. her marvelous
lists, items methodically checked off when
comp[leted, that fine analytic but intensely
female mind that focuses on detail & is not
dismayed by it.²⁵

But the poet does not delude herself about that which
is to come. The natural order of things decrees that the
daughter overwhelm and destroy her mother, figuratively
speaking. In order to become a fully-autonomous human
being, she must separate herself from her mother,
eradicating (almost totally) the bonds of dependency:

So far so good, my darling, my fair
first born, your hair black as ebony
your lips red as blood. But let there be
no mistaking how the dark scheme runs.
Too soon all this will befall:

²⁵ Lifshin, 27.

Too soon the huntsman will come.

He will bring me the heart of a wild boar
and I in error will have it salted and cooked
and I in malice will eat it bit by bit
thinking it yours.

And as we both know, at the appropriate moment
I will be consumed by an inexorable fire
as you look on.

Conflict will naturally arise between mother and daughter; it is, after all, the "dark scheme." If the daughter does not break her bonds with her mother and find her own path, she, quite literally here, will be consumed. This cannot happen; the daughter cannot be subsumed if the daughter/mother/daughter continuum is to thrive. So, the daughter must choose her own path, must separate herself from her mother even while recognizing her ties to her mother (the "dark scheme" has occurred previously) and while now, perhaps, understanding something of their sameness.

Recognizing her similarity to her mother is not an easy thing for a daughter, however. Certainly there are many aspects of life that a mother and daughter have in common and that increase as the daughter continues further into her own life-cycle. Mother and daughter are female, they are both daughters, and they have undergone/will undergo similar rites of passage: they are born; they menstruate; they must search for autonomy, identity, and

self-actualization; they mother themselves as life-cycles dictate that they lose their mothers (both through alienation and through death), internalizing the mother-daughter relationship; and they give birth to their own daughters, and in so doing, watch the process repeat in their own images. "The Journey" (for Jane at thirteen) (H, 98), describes the poet's realization of similarities to her daughter, as well as the former's realization that the latter does not yet understand their deep similarity. Seeing her daughter off on her journey, the poet realizes: "of course you do not belong to me / nor I to you / and everything is only true in mirrors." They are distinct from each other, yet they also "mirror" each other. As the poet recounts what her daughter has packed--all of the trappings of thirteen-year-old, independent, budding adulthood--she realizes that this extended journey is in essence a rite-of-passage for her daughter who, at thirteen, is moving rapidly into young womanhood. The daughter greets the start of this journey alone calmly:

You lean as bland as sunshine on the rails.

Whatever's next--

the old oncoming uses

of your new troughs and swells--

is coin for trading among girls

in gym suits and geometry classes.

With her "new troughs and swells" (perhaps developing breasts), Kumin's daughter is ready to encounter whatever

may befall her. In her confidence and her youth she does not apprehend that she now shares another life experience, another rite of passage, with her mother:

How can you know I travelled here,
stunned like you, by my reflection
in forest pools;
hunted among the laurel
and whispered to by swans
in accents of my own invention?

Where the daughter is now figuratively travelling on her life's journey, so too did the poet once embark on the same type of figurative quest. But her daughter is yet too young to see her as anything but mother. The daughter cannot yet imagine her mother as a thirteen-year-old, feeling all that being that age implies. As the daughter's boat leaves, the poet realizes that the child has made a break from her mother, the journey has begun for the daughter:

It is a dangerous time.
the water rocks away the timber
and here is your visa stamped in red.
You lean down your confident head.
We exchange kisses; I call your name
and wave you off as the bridge goes under.

The time is "dangerous" because it is a journey into unknowns for both mother and daughter, as the daughter's boat is "rock[ed]" on the water: the boat becomes a new

cradle, rocked by the ocean. The daughter ventures toward womanhood, albeit with much confidence. While she does not yet understand her connections to her mother in terms of similarity of experience, she is now moving toward a point where such a recognition would be possible. And the poet-mother watches the "bridge go under," the bridge that links her to her daughter. Autonomy has begun. The daughter/mother/daughter continuum perseveres.

While the daughter and mother share similarities, though the daughter is not yet able to perceive them, they are also, certainly, separate beings. "Parting" (RS, 32) takes as its subject the airport-partings of daughters and their parents, describing those leave-takings in such a generic fashion as to underscore the universality of the way in which such partings occur:

They are done with speaking.

They do not weep.

They do not touch one another except

after the final boarding call

when they are fastened all

three as in a dangerous struggle

exploding only as she

is drawn into the silver belly of the jet

and shot from the parents

and this is the celestial arrangement.

Here, the daughter is "shot from the parents" to go forth to find her own way, as is the "celestial arrangement," the

way of the world, the way of life. Also, if one thinks of "the final boarding call" as death, the implication is that one cannot really "touch" one's parents until after their deaths: only at that time can they be fully understood in terms of life-cycles and in terms of the continuum.

Separation, alienation, and loss of a once-much-closer relationship become familiar words and feelings to mothers and to their daughters as well. Despite the separation, the daughters will carry their mothers forth with them--having incorporated and internalized their mothers--but the relationship, once the daughters have grown and made the split, must change. In "Leaving My Daughter's House" (GT, 19), the poet speaks of her pain at this alienation from her grown daughter, alluding as well to her daughter's similar pain:

And no matter how hard I run I know
I can't penetrate my daughter's life
in this tiny Flemish town where vectors of glass
roofs run to the horizon...

Tomorrow...

I will have crossed the ocean, gone beyond time
where we stand in a mannerly pose at the window
watching the ancient iron strike flint from
stones,
balancing on the bit that links us and keeps us
from weeping o God into each other's arms.

Alienation and loss, here literally represented by a soon-to-be ocean between the mother and the daughter, are present as a matter of course in the adult versions of the relationships--of necessity as the daughters pull away to find their own paths. Here, the daughter puts an ocean between her mother and herself, the better to find her own path. But this necessity of separation and autonomy causes much pain for both mother and daughter. After all, our lives are such that we are "sleepless together / all of us missing our mothers" (LA, 67, "Diary"), into perpetuity. Mother-comfort, soother of the primordial part of the brain, is something we continually seek:

Somewhere is Innisfree,
 is Zion,
 somewhere a womb
 opens inward,
 a kind whale whose stomach room
 is warmly moist
 and undangerously brown.
 (P, 60, "Sleep")

The pain of separation and the loss of the intimate mother-daughter relationship is something natural that must be endured as the daughters follow their own destinies:

O summers without end, the exact truth is
 we are expanding sideways as haplessly
 as in the mirrors of the Fun House.
 We bulge toward the separate fates that await us

sometimes touching, as sleeves will, whether
or not a hug was intended.

(RS, 38, "Sunbathing on a Rooftop in Berkeley")

The poet implores "summers without end"--perhaps the summers of her daughter's childhood--as if in injunction, to change the natural order of things, to bring her daughter back; the poet laments her loss. She too must now internalize her relationship with her daughter as her daughter is taken from her. The poet mourns her daughter also (taken from her through "death-by-separation" (RS, 7, "Address to the Angels")) in "Seeing the Bones" (RS, 38), a poem of address to the daughter who left her parents "for a European career." She is "daughter of the file drawer / citizen of no return," her mother missing her as their only contact is "letters home that fall Fridays / in the box at the foot of the hill / saying the old news, keeping it neutral." The separation of mother and daughter is poignantly realized here as the poet notes that the news is "old": even her daughter's most immediate or present communication is now stale--their lives are no longer inextricably woven together. A continent away, across the great all-mothering ocean,²⁶ the daughter--in effect mostly dead to her parents, given their little contact--follows her own destiny, one which leads her away from her parents, for "this is the celestial arrangement" (RS, 32,

²⁶ Prairie, 109.

"Parting"). The daughter/mother/daughter continuum can function only if the daughters follow their own paths. Adult daughter and mother are fated to be "at arm's length always" (LA, 14, "Expatriate"), alienated from and wary of each other, yet inextricably bound by scores of ties and similarities, by a continuum.

IV. In addition to the images of the mother-daughter relationship, there are many other images of mothers in Kumin's work. In order to fully appreciate the richness of mother images in the poet's work, one must include some attention to these more general images as well. The image of the mother is often presented as archetype, appearing at times as the great mother, as Mother Nature, and as the "teeth mother." In still other poems, the images of mothers include a brief mention of the poet's grandmother and "Mother Rosarine"--a poem about the reverend mother of the convent school where the young Kumin was educated for a time. Still other mother-images are provided as the poet writes of the way she became a sort of surrogate mother to her swimming students. And finally, the everpresent water imagery--with its traditional alliance with mothers through amniotic fluid--in Kumin's poetry provides a sense of a mother presence.

Curiously, despite the strength of the mother/daughter theme in Kumin's poetry, and despite the fact that she has

several poems addressing her grandfather (as mentioned in an earlier chapter), there is scarce mention of the poet's grandmother. "For Anne At Passover" (H, 100) contains perhaps the most substantial reference to her grandmother:

I remember my father's mother boiled
chickens with their feet on, and we ate,
blasphemous modern children, from her plate
both meat and milk and stayed up loved and late,
no letter law applying to a child.
I have sealed her in me, her fierce love
of kindred all she had to give,...

The love of kindred has become an important theme in Kumin's work, so one can surmise that, although there is not much mention of the poet's grandmother, her influence and her presence--"I have sealed her in me"--are undeniable.

Mother Rosarine, in the poem of the same name (P, 12) was also a strong influence in the poet's life. Of Jewish ancestry, Kumin was sent to a convent school of which Mother Rosarine was the director. The poet's ambivalence about her early Catholic education, and her indications of the strength of this education, become clear in this poem as Mother Rosarine quite literally becomes a mother for the young child as the ruling reverend mother of the school, and figuratively becomes a mother as well as she educates the child in the ways of Christianity. This is a powerful mother:

Next-door Mother Rosarine

of the square white front and black buckram
 tugged up the morning with cinches of keys,
 rode through The Mass, a bristle-chinned queen,
 jingling the tongues that unlocked the linens,
 the larder, the gym suits that luffed at the
 knees
 of the boarders, and swung on the door to His
 Kingdom

The description of this woman parallels the poet's description of her mother in "A Voice From The Roses" (P, 37). Similar to the poet's biological mother, Mother Rosarine is here imbued with immense power, able to "tug up the morning" and to cause all manner of other things to happen as well. The description of this nun is a bit witch-like in her mostly black garb and as a "bristle-chinned queen": a traditional or stereotypical image of a witch. The child, on the other hand, is all innocence as:

I came in screw curls and dotted swisses,
 came through the hedge to that swaddled lap.
 Cheeks on her starch, a traitor to my class,
 I nibbled Christ's toes on the rosewood cross
 and begged her, Mother, take off your cap.
 Oh I filled up my vestal with baby kisses.

A Jew in a Catholic arena, the poet figuratively takes on this woman as a mother, even addressing her as such; as the child "nibble[s] Christ's toes"--reminiscent of the way

that Hansel and Gretel nibbled the witch's gingerbread house--she tries on the garb of Catholicism, partaking of a different type of communion. The child recognizes, however, that she is: "Wrong, born wrong for the convent games / I hunched on the sidelines, beggar fashion. / My child, said Mother Rosarine, / rooting for your side is a useful passion." Mother Rosarine offers assurance here that "rooting for your side is a useful passion," but she is talking about something larger than just the basketball games going on there: she is certainly referring to the fact that the girl is a Jew, and that this fact is not something that Mother Rosarine would scorn. So, the message she gives the young girl is that her being Jewish will not conflict with their relationship. She seems to respect the child's heritage and beliefs.

Another mother image is present in the poet's description of her swimming students. In several poems Kumin writes of her role as surrogate mother to her students, teaching them about the evils of drowning lurking beneath a seemingly innocent lake and guiding them through the rite of passage that learning about that malevolent underside implies. She calls them "my boys and girls" (H, 11, "Junior Life Saving") for example, and in doing so takes them on as her children. She warns them of the lake, so that:

The magic seeps away.

My heroes frown to see

a menace in the element

they lately loved.

Class, I say (and want

to say, children, my dears,

I too know how to be afraid),

I tell you what I know:

go down to save.

What she has to tell them is deceptively simple: they should descend into the unconscious and face their fears, "go down to save," that they may save themselves. What is literally a lesson about how to avoid drowning with the victim one is attempting to rescue, becomes a lesson in life. The poet here is a mother-figure in that she is instructing and guiding her students and readers to keep them safe. In a related poem, "Breakthrough" (H, 13), Kumin describes a pond that is not totally frozen over:

Late afternoon. Skaters still seam a ring
 Around the pond, a circle that shuts in
 The gray curd over black water where a spring
 Freshens the core. We know the center's thin
 And keep away and keep our children back,
 But someone's child, chasing for a puck,
 Shoots out beyond the mark and is snatched in.

No warning crack, no cry--and he is gone...

In teaching her students, in teaching her own children, the poet would warn them of such dangers so that they do not become "someone's child," the child--as in e.e. cummings'

notion of "somepeople"--who is sucked into the lake. As teacher and as mother, the poet keeps her children safe.

A more archetypal great Mother appears in a number of poems as the poet writes of Mother Nature and of the way that water is a mothering force. Her descriptions of "Mother Nature" range from referring to a dead, beached whale as "Cousin Mama" (LA, 42, "Gladly") to a description of the manner in which mud is produced:

You would think that the little birches
would die of that brown mouth sucking
and sucking their root ends.

The rain runs yellow.

The mother pumps in, pumps in
more than she can swallow.

All of her pockmarks spill over.

(UC, 27, "Mud")

The force of mud--death--opposes the mother force pumping in nourishing moisture. From the loam will come life, despite the fact that it looks as if everything will be drowned:

The slugs come alive. An army
of lips works in its own ocean.
The boulders gape to deliver themselves.
Stones will be born of that effort.

Meanwhile the mother is sucking.

Pods will startle apart,

pellets be seized with a fever
 and as the dark gruel thickens,
 life will stick up a finger.

The world is birthing itself. The mud becomes a medium through which this birthing will take place, so that what looked as if it would strangle or drown that which it surrounded, actually becomes a muck which surrounds budding things in a womb-like way.

Water, in oceans, lakes, swimming pools, also is all-encompassing, becoming an amniotic medium for the poet at times, causing her to feel rejuvenated and reborn upon immersing herself in it. Water imagery is particularly important to this poet who wanted to be an olympic swimmer. The swimming pool in which she logs her daily laps is "mother-warm" (HBFG, 29, "The Knot") and as she swims, she implores: "O my chlorinated Mediterranean! Hold me! / I rock across that cradle, a shipwreck / for twenty laps, then haul myself on deck / back in the impossible freight of my body." The poet is reborn as she swims, rocked in the "cradle" of the pool. This sense is present also as she writes of the way in which swimming is a cleansing, a type of baptism:

Each time I tear this seam to enter,
 all that I carry is taken from me,
 shucked in the dive.

Lovers, children, even words go under.

Matters of dogma spin off in the freestyle
 earning that mid-pool spurt, like faith.

(HBFG, 31, "To Swim, To Believe")

The comforting, enveloping water can render one clean of
 all outer impediments.

The great all-mothering ocean--discussed elsewhere--is
 another type of mother of which the poet writes. But in
 addition to the ocean, the poet uses images of lakes to
 represent the mother as a life-force and a nurturing force
 as well. "Morning Swim" (P, 3) has the poet setting out
 "oily and nude" for her morning swim; it is as if she is to
 be reborn, swimming in the morning (the time suggesting
 infancy), nude (as one is when born) and oily as if
 anointed/covered with amniotic fluids. The swim is one
 that--like her swimming in the pool--renews her. She
 becomes of the lake rather than just in the lake:

Fish twitched beneath me, quick and tame.

In their green zone they sang my name

My bones drank water; water fell

Through all my doors. I was the well

That fed the lake that met my sea

In which I sang "Abide With Me."

Here the mother/daughter continuum is represented by the
 idea that the flow between the swimmer and the lake seems
 bi-directional; the life-force of the poet is fed by the

lake and she becomes so saturated with it that it becomes impossible to distinguish the "lake" from the "well." She becomes one with the water and is rejuvenated in the process.

The image of the mother is also presented as the "teeth mother"--a destructive force represented in Kumin's poetry by such images as "toothy vaginas" (LA, 47, "Louise Bourgeois Exhibit"). While the mother-image is predominantly one representing a life-affirming force, images of the negative mother also appear throughout Kumin's work. In "Visiting Professor" (LA, 45) for example, the poet writes of:

Poseidon submarine carrying
like the fish, its eggs enough
to flood the pond, warheads enough

to level every medium
every large city in
the Soviet Union, that one

Poseidon sub sticks up its snub nose.

The fact that the Poseidon submarine has within it "eggs" of destruction, is a perversion of the mother-, the life-force. These obviously are eggs which bring death rather than life--eggs created by human beings, one might add: a perversity of nature.

The teeth mother is represented also in the poem "June 15th" (P, 74). "On this day of errors" a field mouse

births her litter in the poet's desk drawer. "Come for a pencil," she watches the births, and leans forward, frightening the mother:

As if I were an enlarged owl
made both gross and cruel,
I lean closer.

The mother rears and kills.
Her forelegs loop like paper clips
as she tears at her belly fur,
shredding it fine as onion skin,
biting the blind and voiceless nubbles off.

Later, she runs past me.
I see her mouth
is stuffed full of a dead baby.

Though she intends no harm, the poet causes the mouse to kill her young; the babies die immediately after they are born in a perversion of birth. The mouse-mother immediately kills those to which she has just given birth.

Another manifestation of the teeth mother is found as the poet compares watching Julia Child cook on television with films of starving children shown in commercials for the purposes of soliciting donations. Kumin intertwines these images so that the absurdity of the situation becomes clear: Julia Child explains how to prepare a delectable multi-course meal while children die who cannot get enough

calories to subsist from "dried-milk mush, / the concentrate made out of ground-up trash fish." A world which presents such absurdities is perverse; Kumin draws a parallel between this situation and "that sly Dean, Jonathan Swift['s]" "A Modest Proposal." Positing Swift as a guest at Julia Child's dinner table in this poem suggests that babies be used for food. As "Dinner With Julia" goes off the air, the poet is deeply troubled by the starving children:

After the credits come up I continue to sit
with those who are starving to death in a distant
nation
squatting, back-lit by the desert, hands out, in
my head
and the Dublin Dean squats there too, observing
the population

that waits for too little dried milk, white rice,
trash fish.

Always the camera is angled so they look up
while their babies are weighed in slings on color
television,
look into our living rooms and the shaded rooms
we sleep in.

(LA, 49, "Video Cuisine")

These bleak images are contrasted with the opulence of the dinner which "Julia" has prepared. There is a "resplendent

fish": "an / Alaska salmon," "steak tartare," and "zinfandel." The absurdity and the contrasts strike the poet who realizes that the starving "look into our living rooms and the shaded rooms we sleep in," as if to accuse, as if to look in on plenty from a position of extreme need. "Video Cuisine" provides an understanding of the cuisine of Julia Child, the basic food requirements of starving human beings, and the fact that these visions and contrasts are "food for thought." There is something quite decadent about human beings who delight in excess given the dire needs of others in the world. The teeth-mother is present here, a destructive force which is a aberration of the all-nurturing presence of the great mother; the perversity of human beings brings the teeth mother into existence--she is scarcely found in nature.

Images of the mother are woven throughout Kumin's poetry, enriching and expanding the sense of the daughter/mother/daughter continuum. While there are some representations of the mother-force which are less than positive, most of the images are indeed depictions of a life-force which is sustaining and nurturing. Kumin's sense of a matrilinear progression, it is clear, extends beyond a simple sense of family and heritage, to include even the forces of nature. The daughter/mother/daughter continuum is indeed pervasive.

A Reverence For Nature

Disillusioned with formalized religion, Kumin declares herself agnostic, as illustrated in a number of her poems. Disenchanted with formalized religion, she seeks other ways of ordering her world.¹ Kumin's nature poems reveal the directions in which she turns. They present a sense of the poet's metaphysics as being worshipful, reverent of nature.² Kumin is drawn to the order nature presents, an order with which she can make sense of her world, including

¹ Her focus on the order in nature is a wellspring of energy for Kumin's poetry: "It's always this fascination with order, and wanting to surround the day with a kind of order so that the thought processes can be as bizarre and wild and free as they want to be...." Kumin's passion for order shows up in her poetry, which is distinguished by careful attention to rhyme and meter. It is very exact. Like Rilke, she hates the approximate. A poet of nature, she insists on showing the natural world as it really is, and not as a benign fantasy. A brood mare lies down to die 'all silken on one side, all mud on the other.'" (Tim Clark, "The Unforgivable Maxine Kumin," Yankee Dec. 1975: 210-11.

² Estella Lauter has remarked that contemporary poetry by women reveals an "extensive pattern of concerns with nature.... A new myth may be taking shape. In it, nature remains female but becomes equal to the human." (Estella Lauter, Women as Mythmakers, Poetry and Visual Art by Twentieth-Century Women (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984): x.

its losses.³ For with the sense of order found in the natural world comes a comprehension of, an understanding of, and an appreciation for life-cycles, of life arising from death, and of retrieval of loss.⁴ The poet finds in nature a presence of some type of divine force or being that is exclusive of human beings.⁵ She perceives nature

³ Carol Christ (Womanspirit Rising) notes that "women's traditional roles have allowed them to maintain contact with nature and natural processes, while society as a whole has moved toward increasing alienation from nature. The sense of closeness to nature that some women experience in nature mysticism or in the cycles of their bodies, in menstruation, pregnancy, and birth have much to teach all women and men about the rootedness of the human condition in the natural order. It can even be argued that if women's sense of connection to nature had informed the culture creators of our society, Western culture might not have 'progressed to the ecological crisis we now endure. In traditional theology and philosophy, women have been equated with nature and men with freedom and transcendence. The new focus on women and nature elevates that which traditional theology and culture have denigrated. But it does not always offer resources to understand those elements of freedom and transcendence of nature that are also part of the human condition in general and feminist experience in particular. For, while modern feminist women may be reclaiming their bodies, they are not letting biology determine their life choices." (pp. 11-12)

⁴ Turning to the natural world, Kumin replicates many other women who find a spiritual home there. "Simon de Beauvoir has commented that the human male's 'transcendence' of nature is symbolized by his ability to hunt and kill, just as the human female's identification with nature, her role as a symbol of immanence, is expressed by her central involvement in that life-giving but involuntary birth process which perpetuates the species. Thus, superiority--or authority--'has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth but to that which kills.'" (Quoted in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, eds., The Madwoman in the Attic (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979): 14.

⁵ Lauter remarks that "nature is re-spiritualized in poetry by women--that is, it is understood as co-equal with the human self, with layers as mysterious as our own...."

as a pre-lapsarian Eden infringed upon by imperfect, even depraved human beings. In particular, Kumin contrasts the wickedness of human beings with what she discerns as the innocence of animals: "animals / are honest through their inability / to lie" (RS, 7, "Address to the Angels"). Kumin's contrasting of imperfect human beings with innocent nature is shared by Robinson Jeffers:⁶ "Integrity is wholeness, the / greatest beauty is / Organic wholeness,

(p. 179) "Throughout this body of poetry, nature has, for the most part, a female form; the relationship between human life and nature, however, is not exploitative. The radical proposal underlying the images is that the claims of the human and nature are equal. 'This earth is my sister.'" (p. 184)

⁶ Kumin shares the view of perverse human beings/ innocent nature with Robinson Jeffers who described this philosophy as "inhumanism." In his introduction to Jeffers's Rock and Hawk (New York: Random House, 1987), editor Robert Haas describes Jeffers's "doctrine of inhumanism, as he called it.... The world, the universe, is one being, a single organism, one great life that includes all life and all things, and is so beautiful it must be loved and revered, and in moments of mystical vision we identify ourselves with it.... The whole human race spends too much emotion on itself. The happiest and freest man is the scientist investigating nature, or the artist admiring it, the person who is interested in things that are not human." (pp. xxxiii) Jeffers progressed from the "assertion of the integrity and reality of the natural world to the identification of that world with God. It was in fact the leap that had already been taken by the American transcendentalists. And it is one that he made soon enough; Jeffers's is a more chilling conception than Emerson's or Thoreau's, based as it is on the early twentieth century's picture of the physical universe and on the status of human beings as understood by evolutionary biology. The world is, and human consciousness has no very special part in it, and human suffering no special meaning." (p. xix) "And finally there was the leap--to the wholeness of things, a leap out of the human and its pained and diseased desiring into the permanence and superb indifference of nature." (p. xxxi)

the wholeness of life and things, the divine / beauty of the universe. Love that, not man / Apart from that, or else you will share man's pitiful confusions, / or drown in despair when his days darken."⁷

Kumin's experience with loss and her search for absolutes becomes resolved in nature.⁸ Like other women writers, Kumin resolves her spiritual quest and finds rescue from nothingness in nature:

Women's experiences in nature are extremely significant because they can occur in solitude when a woman feels isolated from other people and has nowhere to turn. When in the depths of despair and loneliness many women are rescued by sensing their grounding in nature.⁹

Finding such comfort leads to a desire to act. Christ insists that it is crucial that women voice their experiences, providing the counterpoint to "hearing themselves into speech."¹⁰

After a woman experiences the grounding of her quest in the powers of being, it is important for her to name her experience in words. When one woman puts her experiences into words, another

⁷ "The Answer," Rock and Hawk, 195.

⁸ See Juhasz's discussion of Emily Dickinson's nature poems in Naked and Fiery Forms, 17-20.

⁹ Christ, Diving Deep..., 23.

¹⁰ Nellie Morton quoted in Christ, Diving Deep..., 7.

woman who has kept silent, afraid of what others will think, can find validation.... 'The dream of a common language,' which Adrienne Rich has movingly depicted, is realized in the moment when two women acknowledge each other and themselves.¹¹

As women voice their experiences, they learn to re-name the components of their worlds in ways that are life-affirming and empowering:

Women have called the process of giving form to their experience through words 'a new naming.' Mary Daly has spoken of the Genesis story of Adam's naming of woman and the animals as paradigmatic of a cosmic 'false naming' in which women and the world have been named only from men's point of view. As women begin to name the world for themselves not only will they create new life possibilities for women, they will also upset the world order that has been taken for granted for centuries.... Learning to value everything about being a woman is a key theme in women's new naming. Women name the beauty and strength of women's bodies and of their own particular bodies. They learn to value the life-giving potential of their monthly bleeding and

¹¹ Christ, Diving Deep..., 23.

celebrate their bodies' connections to nature. Women learn to overcome the 'false naming' and devaluing of traditional women's activities like mothering and nurturing. They begin to name women's activities as sources of insight, to name women's valuing of nurturance as a power of life which women may use to transform culture, and to celebrate those bold women who have defied conventional roles.¹²

Kumin is not alone in her turning to nature for spiritual resolution. Many other women writers experience similar mystical epiphanies which lead to an enhanced perception of life-cycles and of the continuity in a matrilinear progression. Christ observes that this grounding in nature leads to rituals particular to women:

Women's rituals affirm the sisterhood and power of women. Many also affirm the grounding of women's power in nature. Some women also have begun to name the power that is celebrated in women's rituals 'Goddess.' To name God in oneself, or to speak the word 'Goddess' again after many centuries of silence is to reverse age-old patterns of thinking in which male power and female subordination are the norm.¹³

¹² Christ, Diving Deep, 24.

¹³ Christ, Diving Deep..., 128.

Although the Goddess, per se, does not appear in Kumin's work, the poet's obvious turning away from patriarchal religions leads one to speculate that, at the very least, the Goddess--connected with the seasons, with life-cycles, with continuity--remains a metaphor for Kumin's resolution of her spiritual quest within nature. From Judaism to Catholicism to Mother Earth, Kumin has transcended to a recognition of matriarchal connections with nature.

Her view of animals as innocents leads the poet to seek a reunion with this nature. Kumin's sequence poems (the hermit poems, the Henry Manley poems, the Thoreau poems, and the Amanda poems) best illustrate the sense of union with nature and the sense of solitude which the poet would seek. Ralph J. Mills describes the Hermit poems as intensifying "the feeling of solitary humanity in the midst of nature--in the actualities of soil, pond, trees, beans, local topography, animal tracks in the snow, an ancient bathtub used for a watering trough, the gravestones of an old cemetery, the variety of insects frequenting a pond, the hundred-and-sixty-year-old markings in an attic, a handbook of simples, and so forth."¹⁴ For it is living on her Edenic farm tending her animals and her garden, and feeling a sense of unity with the natural world that

¹⁴ Mills, 223-4.

satisfies the poet. The isolation of the farm and being alone in nature provides her with much-needed solitude so that, like the persona in her sequence poems, she feels more at one with nature. Christ observes that "the choice of solitude is not so much a rejection of community as a recognition that certain experiences and truths are so alien to ordinary consciousness that the individual must withdraw in order to experience them."¹⁵ In leading a life of solitude Kumin is able to commune with nature, allowing herself spiritual and poetic space. In Joyce Carol Oates's words, Kumin's poetry: "demonstrates beautifully how the transcendental vision is really the vision of imaginative existential life, available to anyone who seeks it."¹⁶

Central to Kumin's turning to nature to discover a ruling order is her belief that human beings are less than perfect. The confusion she knew as a child--with a Jewish ancestry yet educated in a Catholic school--transmuted into a cynicism about formalized religion, as well as a belief in the essential evil of human beings. She finds a fundamental wrongness in human character, a wrongness that manifests itself in and that allows callous human beings to torture animals and desecrate the earth. In a 1975 interview with Martha George Meek Kumin stated quite plainly that: "I don't think of us as infinitely

¹⁵ Christ, Diving Deep..., 46.

¹⁶ Oates, 7.

perfectible as I might have twenty-five years ago. I think we're infinitely depraved, and brutish, and nasty."¹⁷

Strong in language and implication, the poem "Heaven As Anus" (HBFG, 66) treats another human perversity, that of needlessly torturing animals in laboratories. Kumin terms this poem an "overt protest poem." She says of it "I tried it out on my students when I was teaching at the Newton College of the Sacred Heart, and I remember one of them said afterward, 'Poor God, everyone blames everything on Him.' I thought that was a marvelous kind of compassion to have. 'Heaven as Anus' is obviously an antiwar, anti-behavior modification poem."¹⁸ Human beings torture other human beings in the name of Christ, whether waging war or persecuting on an individual basis. Human beings are also responsible for atrocities meted out to helpless animals. One form of depravity is the human belief that the lives of animals are not only worth much less than the lives of human beings, but they are also such that one need not worry about inflicting terror or pain through vivisection or any number of other methods:

In the Defense Department there is a shop
where scientists sew the eyelids of rabbits open
lest they blink in the scorch of a nuclear drop

¹⁷ Meek, 20.

¹⁸ Hammond, 54.

and elsewhere dolphins are being taught to defuse
bombs in the mock-up of a harbor and monkeys
learn to perform the simple tasks of draftees.

For Kumin, using animals to test weapons of war and to perform like soldiers, underscores the corruption of human beings who would destroy not only themselves, but also anything in their path. In addition to inflicting pain on/instilling fear in the animals, human beings manipulate them, toying with the balance of nature to satisfy curiosities. If "natural process, as much as it signifies for the individual mostly a process of continual loss, becomes, in its strict and identifiable limits, not only endurable but reassuring...truly horrible is the human perversion of natural process":¹⁹

Implanting electrodes yields rich results:
alley cats turn from predators into prey.
Show them a sparrow and they cower

while the whitewall labs fill up with the feces
of fear

where the calves whose hearts have been done away
with walk and bleat on plastic pumps.

The types of experiments described here recall Nazi experimentation upon their Jewish captives, without regard for terror or pain. Kumin also castigates those children

¹⁹ Meek, "Authenticity of Detail," 84.

of God--those who at least profess a belief in Christian charity and mercy--for the atrocities they visit on animals:

And what is any of this to the godhead,
 these squeals, whines, writhings, unexpected
 jumps,
 whose children burn alive, booby-trap the dead,
 lop ears and testicles, core and disembowel?

It all ends at the hole. No words may enter
 the house of excrement. We will meet there
 as the sphincter of the good Lord opens wide
 and he takes us all inside.

Not only do the children of the godhead come under the poet's attack, but also the godhead Himself, as He allows His "children" to perpetuate such perversions. This is a patriarchal God who fails to protect the innocent from the depraved--an ineffective, uncaring deity. And one whom Kumin rejects. For this is a God who has as much as created human beings not from mud, but from excrement: human beings are truly corrupt if they can self-righteously torture, maim, and kill. Symbolically presented as waste matter in this poem human beings are perversions of what God had intended, rather than being worthy of the power and gifts bestowed upon them as Christianity would teach. Underscored by her use of such startling/shocking language and imagery, Kumin's belief in the perversity of human

beings is clear here. Harkening back to the concept of original sin, human beings are enslaved to an inescapable depravity.

Another variation on the theme of corrupt human beings is depicted in "The Summer of the Watergate Hearings" (HBFG, 94), in which the poet aligns worming her horse with--in so many words--worming the government. Perhaps the first fully political poem (in this, her fifth collection, and prior to the time when she stated that all poetry is political)²⁰ this poem sets forth in striking detail the worming of Amanda, metaphorically and graphically using this process to comment upon corruption in government:

This morning she steams.
 Little pyramids of her droppings
 surround her. Dead worms
 shine in them like forgotten
 spaghetti, proof she has eaten
 the sugar-coated cure.
 Four dozen ascarids, ten strongyles--
 I count them to make sure.

Worming the mare rids her of parasites which feed upon her from the inside. Kumin's detail in the use of worm names as well as counting them, graphically underscores the corruption, as does the use of "spaghetti" and "sugar"--

²⁰ Personal, unpublished interview, 10-11 May 1987.

worms "shine," resembling food similar to the way that politicians are mistaken for people with scruples. The reader's discomfort with the metaphoric treatment of the Watergate government enhances the poet's perception of the process as a nauseating "cure" of a corrupt government. As the horse expels the worms, the poet counts them ensuring that the cure will take. Likewise, the Watergate hearings proceed:

And all the while in Washington
worms fall out of the government
pale as the parasites that drain
from the scoured gut of my mare.

They blink open on the television screen.
Night after night on the re-run
I count them to make sure.

As with the mare, the poet must count the "worms" as they fall out of the government, that the cure might take. The corrupt human beings, here in the form of politicians, infest the government and must be purged if the government is to be healthy.

In addition to the corruption which the poet sees in vivisectionists and in government officials--to name just two types of many varieties of corrupt individuals--Kumin also recognizes that she, herself, exhibits disturbing tendencies. "Woodchucks" (UC, 28) treats the poet's realization of the dark underside of her own nature. The

woodchucks are pests, decimating the poet's garden. So when the "knockout bomb from the Feed and Grain Exchange"--the place of purchase in itself ironic, for a bomb has little to do with feed and grain--does not work in its "merciful" way, the poet shoots them:

The food from our mouths, I said, righteously
thrilling
to the feel of the .22, the bullets' neat noses.
I, a lapsed pacifist fallen from grace
puffed with Darwinian pieties for killing,
now drew a bead on the littlest woodchuck's face.
He died down in the everbearing roses.

This "lapsed pacifist" feels the "thrill" of shooting creatures who are not forcing the human beings--with money enough for "cigarettes / and state-store Scotch"--to starve, and neither are the woodchucks capriciously destroying the garden. Rather, they feed on "broccoli shoots, beheading the carrots." Which is not to say that the human beings did not plan to utilize the food in the garden, but rather, which is to say something about the co-existence of human beings and animals. The poet feels sanctified in her shooting of the woodchucks by noting that they are stealing "the food from [her] mouth," when in actuality it is not entirely want which causes her to shoot these creatures. She recognizes this disparity:

O one-two-three
the murderer inside me rose up hard,

the hawkeye killer came on stage forthwith.

There's one chuck left. Old wily fellow, he

keeps

me cocked and ready day after day after day.

All night I hunt his humped-up form. I dream

I sight along the barrel in my sleep.

If only they'd all consented to die unseen

gassed underground the quiet Nazi way.

The "murderer" within Kumin surfaces as she shoots the woodchucks, wishing they'd died "unseen / gassed underground the quiet Nazi way," as if to say that had they died in this fashion, the "murderer" would not have emerged. Surely she would not have been as cognizant of the results of her actions. The poet now reveals an obsession with exterminating the woodchucks--an almost personal battle as she names him "chuck," in the process. But the most disturbing of the aspects of the whole situation for her is that she recognizes her own malevolent underside, manifested as "killer," which has surfaced because of the woodchucks. She too has a depraved side that she seeks to control/escape.

Kumin contrasts the innocence of animals with the depravity she recognizes and loathes in human beings. One of the Amanda poems, "Eyes" (HBFG, 92) presents the poet's turning to her horse for comfort, for identification:

I have come back from
 the feed-bag-checkered restaurant
 from the pale loose tears of my dearest friend
 her eyeballs clinking on ice
 and her mouth drawn down in the grand
 comedy of anguish.

From the pain of being with human beings--here her best friend, Anne Sexton--the poet turns to her mare: "O Amanda, burn out my dark. / Press the warm suede of your horseflesh / against my cold palm. / Take away all that is human." The mare promises not only comfort, but deliverance as well--deliverance from human beings. This stanza seems almost prayer-like in its injunction to Amanda.

Having differentiated between the depravity of human beings and the innocence of animals, Kumin turns to nature to provide order in her world. Through the course of her eight books of poetry, the poems treating nature increase, so that they comprise a major portion of each book from the third on. Notably too, as the nature poems expand, the theme of the Jew in a Christian society becomes less overt in her work: as the poet comes to terms with the later theme, she turns her attention to nature for explanation and ordering of her world. "In the Root Cellar" (HBFG, 41) reflects the poet's reliance on nature for spiritual guidance:

The parsnips, those rabbis
 have braided their beards together

to examine the text. The word
 that engrosses them is: February....
 I am perfect, breathes the onion.
 I am God's first circle
 the tulip that slept in His navel.
 Bite me and be born.

Significantly, Kumin's description and tone in this poem reflect a religious approach to her subject; she is "mostly the believer."²¹ The parsnips are "rabbis," the onion, "God's first circle." This language is typical of a number of Kumin's nature poems and indicative of a the poet's belief in a spirituality connected with nature.

The poet's turning away from organized religion to nature for spiritual guidance--her "search for the soul"²²--is also illustrated in "Shelling Jacobs Cattle Beans" (LA, 73). Kumin's transition from seeking Jew to one who looks to nature for a sense of a divine being is clear:

I, whose ancestors
 put on sackcloth and ashes
 for the destruction of the Temple
 sit winnowing the beans
 on Rosh Hashonah
 in the September sun
 of New Hampshire.

²¹ Rev. of House, Bridge, Fountain, Gate, Publishers Weekly, 79.

²² Hammond, 63.

It is no coincidence that the day is Rosh Hashonah: she celebrates the Jewish New Year by shelling the beans. The bean is a symbol which appears in many of Kumin's poems and which represents a unity with nature as well as the possibility of new life. The poems addressed to Thoreau, for example, make use of this image to show Thoreau's unity with nature. And indeed, at the end of this poem the poet notes: "Let me put my faith in the bean."

"The Hermit Reviews His Simples" (UC, 16) provides a view of a nature and of the "old handbook of simples," which is biblical in its tone. "The old handbook of simples" lays out potions and cures for everything from "snake bites" to "dropsy." "Beewort," "wallwort," and "elderberries" are among the natural cures which the book of simples lists as part of its medicine. There is a sense throughout the poem of a reverence toward nature and of the possibility for healing that nature offers. There is something approaching the mystical:

Bending the snappish twigs down
and careless about their magic
that laid to a snake bite will heal it
or oozed in four draughts will cure dropsy,
he strips off the elderberries.

While he realizes that the elderberries are magic, the hermit takes this magic in stride, much as the Christian might in reflecting upon the somewhat fantastic stories and promises of the Bible. The language of the poem also seems

biblical in its advice: "But after his pail has grown heavy / he observes the ancient injunction / lest any evil befall him: / 'on leaving do not look behind you.'" The message of the last line reminds one of God's warning to Lot and his family as they were fleeing Sodom: "Escape for thy life; look not behind thee, neither stay thou in all the plain; escape to the mountain, lest thou be consumed, (Genesis 19: 17, King James Version). The Revised Standard Version is even more specific: "'Flee for your life; do not look back or stop anywhere in the valley; flee to the hills, lest you be consumed.'" And of course, though Lot did not look back, his wife did and was consequently turned into a pillar of salt. The book of simples would seem to warn against similar consequences for the hermit, should he look back.

The book of simples mandates a course for the hermit to follow. He is warned and advised to take particular action, to brew potions and pick herbs that he remain healthy and, one presumes, happy:

The aliums, brighter than onions
when 'mixed with sallets will render [sons]
more grateful. To bring on the monthlies,
pennyroyal. To fasten loose teeth down,
elfdock. Take thyme for melancholy,
cucumber borage for courage.

If the hermit obeys the mandates of the handbook of simples, his life will be in order: he will be healthy and

he will have grateful sons--sons, not daughters, implying that, by traditional standards, his life is truly blessed. The hermit need only hold to the teachings of the book of simples and observe the laws of nature, about which it was written, to thrive.

Another way Kumin focuses on nature is as she writes of the numerous animals in her life. Again, there is a distinct pattern of animal imagery in contemporary poetry by women:

Perhaps the implications of our collective idea that we are co-equals with the earth will become more apparent when we consider the images of our relationship with animals. If one reads through the separate volumes of poetry by contemporary women, the profusion of images from animal life is striking.²³ Worms and butterflies, unicorns and phoenixes, all manner of birds, pets, farm and forest animals, snakes and rodents, fish and other creatures of the sea abound.²⁴

Significantly:

There is, in this body of poetry by women, a refreshing sense of kinship with animal life

²³ Among modern and contemporary female poets who employ animal imagery extensively are Margaret Atwood, Anne Sexton, Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, Diane di Prima, Denise Levertov, May Sarton, Elizabeth Bishop, May Swenson, and Robin Morgan.

²⁴ Lauter, 185.

without the romantic sense of separation.... This sense of kinship allows for the revival of an anthropomorphic attitude that results in human understanding of the animal's predicament, as in Maxine Kumin's poem on the death of her barren brood mare who had previously borne eighteen foals. [UC, 40, "For a Shetland Pony Brood Mare Who Died in Her Barren Year"] Kumin sympathetically observes the signs of her false pregnancy and wonders if her death was caused by false pride.... Kumin's perspective involves no degradation of the animal, no obliteration of the animal's identity by subsuming it under human psychology.²⁵

Myriad creatures populate Kumin's poems, and it is only after reading of her animals that one understands the poet's love of and commitment to them. Kumin writes of horses, cows, goats, deer, bears, birds, insects, frogs, fish. In short, many animals indigenous to New England are included, as well as a number of animals found elsewhere.²⁶ However, the poet feels a special affinity to horses. Indeed, the Amanda poems, a sequence of poems

²⁵ Lauter, 191.

²⁶ Similarly, Elizabeth Bishop has remarked that there is a bestiary in May Swenson's work; Swenson is "one of the few good poets who write poems about nature...not just comparing it to states of mind or society." Quoted in Alicia Ostriker, "May Swenson and the Shapes of Speculation," in Shakespeare's Sisters, 222.

alternately addressed to and written through the persona of, Kumin's mare, illustrate this special connection. It is a connection so thoroughly explored in Kumin's poetry that one critic felt compelled to write: "I just wish she'd stop writing about her goddamn horse."²⁷

"Cows" (NF, 13) richly describes the poet's attitude toward such creatures. The poet maintains that cows are compelled, through a "message...in the blood" to eat. The cows concentrate mightily on this duty of eating so that they "browse at a steady rate" and "seldom lift their heads." It is a continuous pursuit, this business of finding sufficient food, and it is all-consuming, so to speak, so that there is "time enough for thinking when time stops." These are simple creatures who, the poet speculates, need not think--they need only eat. Kumin contrasts these "old New England cows" who must graze constantly, with cows in Holland:

Philosophers of cows penned up all day
on polders rescued from the bay
feast on a glut of grass.
By noon they raise their heads
and discourse on free will
or ruminate upon the clouds, the seas,
the angle of the sun....

²⁷ Quoted by Philip Booth, "Maxine Kumin's Survival," American Poetry Review 7 (Nov.-Dec. 1978): 18.

These Dutch cows have the luxury of and the bent to be philosophers, freed as they are, by the "glut of grass," to pursue other than merely gastronomical interests. Having contrasted the two kinds of cows, the poet goes on to note that: of their number some / think simply as I do / o to be that full, / that full and dumb." Some of the Dutch cows "think simply as" the poet does; she envies them their singularity of purpose and of mind. Perhaps in being "that full and dumb" these creatures do not dwell on loss or on any of the other preoccupations which consume human beings. Kumin envies these animals their innocence, their ignorance.

Kumin's perception of innocence in animals extends to include all of nature. In some respects, she sees nature as continuing to exist in a pre-lapsarian state: human beings have ruined Eden for themselves--it is their fall from grace--but animals and all else in the natural world continue to live in a state of grace. Terrence Des Pres contends, in his article including attention to Kumin's "You are in Bear Country" (LA, xiii), that:

we have fallen from the Garden, and the Garden itself--nature conceived as an inviolate wilderness--is pocked with nuclear waste and toxic dumps, at the mercy of industry...all of it open to nuclear defilement. Generations come and go, but that 'the earth abideth forever' is something we need to feel, one of the foundations

of poetry and humanness, and now we are not sure. That is the problem with nuclear threat, simply as threat; it undermines all certainty, and things once absolute are now contingent. To feel that one's private life was in the hands of God, or Fate, or even History, allowed the self a margin of transcendence; the dignity of personal life was part of a great if mysterious Order. But now our lives are in the hands of a few men in the Pentagon and the Kremlin, men who, having affirmed that they would destroy us to save us, have certified their madness--and yet their will determines our lives and our deaths. We are, then, quite literally enslaved.²⁸

It is only the encroachment of human beings into the natural world which wreaks havoc and renders it ruined. Furthermore, the poet lives on a farm functioning symbolically as Eden. Providing the poet with isolation from the world of human beings--both physical and emotional isolation--the farm also grants her the sanctity of an enclosed world which still exists in an Edenic state. Here, the poet can order her world; she and her husband even acting in a caretaker capacity as 20th Century prelapsarian Eve and Adam. The sense of enclosure of the

²⁸ Terrence Des Pres, "Self/Landscape/Grid," New England Review and Bread Loaf Quarterly 5.4 (Summer 1983): 446.

farm, of a sane private world within a less-than-sane outer world is unmistakably present. "Lines Written in the Library of Congress After the Cleanth Brooks Lecture" (GT, 36) depicts the two worlds between which the poet is caught. Kumin contrasts the outer world as "suspended / between apathy and terror" with the tranquil world of the farm where here "shaggy red cows / meditate lying down / in mud under the pines," and concludes: "How clumsily / I straddle these two lives!" Except of necessity, her place is on the farm. Kumin's vision of her farm as Eden is reinforced by the poem "Caught" (RS, 57), which begins: "Late August. The goats keep leaving Eden." These rather unwise goats--symbolic of Satan--keep trying to escape this perfect world; by her referring to the farm as Eden, the poet implies that it is absurd that the goats would try to flee. Her sense of contentment in this world is clear:

Late August. Truce, this instant, with what's to
come.

Everything caught. This moment caught. My horse
at the paddock fence making that soft
ingratiating nicker that asks for supper.

No older and no riper than was planned
the sun staining the west. My matching hands.

The poet is at a moment of existential peace, her unity with nature manifested in the fact that her hands--stained red from skinning beets--match the sun; she is in harmony with nature, "everything caught."

That human beings have ruined Eden becomes obvious through "The Poets Observe The Absence of God From The St. Louis Zoo" (GT, 34), among other poems. Keeping its creatures safe, yet because they are confined, slowly leeching the life out of them, the zoo is a perverse Eden.

November, that time of year the Lord
created and forgot, the big cats lurk
diminished in the mouths of their man-made caves.
Most of the pink has been bleached
from the huddled flamingos. The camels squat
over the nests of their folded legs.

These creatures are all diminished by this capacity, the depravity of which is reflected in part of the title: "...the Absence of God..."--for this is the time of year "the Lord / created and forgot." The animals have seemingly lost their will to live:

Nothing is said of the opposable thumb
by means of which in the next pen a muscular
attendant in souwester and boots
force-feeds dead fish to the penguins,
cramming the smelts headfirst like grain
being tamped down the craw of a Strasbourg goose.

One feature which distinguishes human beings from "lower beings" is the opposable thumb. Kumin ironically suggests that this superior creature is inhumane in his treatment of the penguins. Opposable thumb indeed. St. Louis, God, and compassion are all lacking from this zoo.

From the flawed chaos of the human world--which imprisons animals, tortures them in experiments, builds bombs--Kumin turns to nature for a sense of order. Given too, her religious background and consequently her lack of absolutes, the poet finds her sense of spirituality in nature, so that her attitude toward nature is worshipful, reverent, as "The Hermit Prays" (UC, 7) reveals:

I hold in my hand this cup
 this ritual, this slice of womb
 woven of birchbark strips
 and the woolly part of a burst cocoon
 all mortared with mud and chinked
 with papers of snakeskin.

This nest which gives rise to life is woven of things that have been discarded: "the woolly part of a burst cocoon" and "papers of snakeskin." The poet sees the order and economy of nature, but more than that, she has a sense of life-cycles. Des Pres insists that nature

remains the mainstay of our poetry. Natural imagery makes us trust the poem, suggests a permanence at the root of things, and every poem about nature bears somewhere within it the myth of renewal and rebirth.²⁹

And there is a divine presence here as well, a presence rendering this patched-together nest a womb: "God of the

²⁹ Des Pres, 446.

topmost branch / god of the sheltering leaf / fold your
wing over. / Keep secret and keep safe."

In addition, this divine presence in nature is one that is redeeming. The poet takes the stance that no matter what human beings do, no matter how they defile the earth, despite their actions and despite their nature, they will be redeemed. Kumin stated that her attitude toward political poetry has changed over the years so that she now considers it important; although words can't save the world, poets have to make themselves heard.³⁰ Rich concurs with the necessity for political poetry: "there is no private life which is not determined by a wider public life."³¹

"How To Survive Nuclear War" (LA, 51) describes Kumin's sense of human culpability as she considers Hiroshima:

I understand we did this.

I understand

we may do this again

before it is done to us.

In case it is thought of

to do to us.

Not only have human beings committed such atrocity, but the poet has no doubt that it could easily happen again.

³⁰ Personal interview.

³¹ Quoted in Christ, Diving Deep..., 76.

Despite the inherent depravity in human beings making such repetition possible, the poet believes that:

we are all to be rescued.

Though we eat animals
and wear their skins,
though we crack mountains
and insert rockets in them
this signifies
we will burn and go up.

We will be burned and come back.

Despite our atrocities, nature will redeem us. The fire will purify us so that new life comes from our deaths. The poet finds proof of the ongoing process of growth as she looks at the trees under her window: "a line of old ginkgos hunkers down. / The new sprouts that break from / their armless shoulders are / the enemies of despair." The vision of new life rescues the poet; and new life will rescue humanity even from itself. Because nature remains in a pure state--unlike the human beings who defile it--it can persevere, it can rescue. Not religion in any of its myriad forms, but nature alone offers hope for redemption through the laws of life-cycles, of life arising from death.

"Sundays in March" (LA, 59) offers another perspective on the poet's reverence for nature. Every Sunday she and three companions make the journey of the faithful to

reverently look in on a hibernating bear. "Pure in his hole," this bear imbues the poet with a kind of faith:

We whispered over him as if
 his trance were sacred to this cliff.
 As if these watchdays might compare
 with other vigils of our lives--
 the sixties' civil rights sit-ins.
 The lyings down against the war.
 Peacewalks to halt the bomb. Believe
 me, bear's the merest rung we've
 stepped on climbing Jacob's ladder.

The human beings fervently ascend to watch (worship?) the bear much as one might imagine they passionately demonstrated for civil rights and against the war. Kumin has stated that observing how intimately-related all life-forms are is her reverence.³² Climbing to see the bear is equated with climbing Jacob's ladder: "And [Jacob] dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it" (Genesis 28: 12, King James Version). Kumin contrasts the image of the bear with "wild birds...our forebears, / those good gray Victorians...blinded...with hot needles" thinking "that this would make them sing." While the poet purports that "everything pays for growing tame," there is an

³² Personal interview.

unmistakable sense of shame for us all here, that human beings could do such a thing to birds that they give more pleasure. In contrast, the poet gratefully notes:

Each pilgrimage we make
 I hope to find our avatar
 cranky, thin, waked
 by the calendar,
 vanished from the body of the tree.
 Today, at last. Something we watched,
 touched, and let be.

Perhaps, after all, the possibility of good remains within human beings, latent though it may be. The poet would hope to ascend beyond her fore-bears with their cruelty and lack of regard for animal life to a higher rung on the ladder--one represented by the bear whom they visit, and who symbolizes hope for humankind.

The poet's reverence for nature and her belief in a divine force in nature is similarly manifested in her tenets of reincarnation and of retrieval. Seeing life as a continuum including both birth and death, the poet finds a type of redemption in the possibility of growth from death. "Brushing the Aunts" (HBFG, 95), for example, describes how as she brushes her mare the poet thinks of her aunts, retrieving them; also, bits of Amanda's hairs recur in nature, so that they become part of nests. "The Retrieval System" (RS, 1) explains the ways Kumin looks to nature for evidence of her lost people, seeing features of the

lost in the "patient domestic beasts of [her] life." But the poem that best illustrates the poet's view of nature as a lush continuum is "The Grace of Geldings in Ripe Pastures" (RS, 67). The sensual description in this poem emphasizes the fertility of the natural world: "Glutted, half asleep, browsing in / timothy grown so tall I see them / as through a pale-green stage scrim...." The sensuality of the geldings is reinforced by the poet's use of language. The metrical pacing of this stanza is slow, causing the reader to pause, and adding to the soporific, satiated mood of the stanza. The repetition of sounds--no harsh consonants--particularly the "s" sounds also add to the feeling of laziness. The vowel patterns too, especially in the first line, almost sound like yawns: uh, ah, oh. The movement in this poem is slow and graceful:

And still they graze
and grazing, one by one let down

their immense, indolent penises
to drench the everlasting grass
with the rich nitrogen

that repeats them.

Even though these geldings cannot procreate, still they repeat themselves through fertilizing the fields. And they do it indolently, effortlessly; this description emphasizes the ease with which the cycles of nature continue.

In addition to finding reincarnation in nature as a way of fulfilling her spirituality, Kumin has a sense of a divine being appearing from time to time in her poetry. "The Long Approach" (LA, 79), title poem of the collection, illustrates the poet's belief in just such a divine being. The poem describes the way that one must take care to transport horses on an aircraft:

Last week leaving Orlando in a steep climb
my seatmate told me flying horses must be loaded
facing the tail of the plane so they may brace
themselves at takeoff. Otherwise you run
the risk they'll panic, pitch over backwards,
smash their hocks. Landing, said the groom,
there is little we can do for them except
pray for calm winds and ask the pilot
to make a long approach.

The poet understands that there is little that anyone can do for flying horses: they are subject to a fate similar to the spiderlings who will either "grow[] up or die[] where they land" (H, 53, "The Gossamer"). One can only hope for the best--the rest is luck. This realization leads the poet to align herself and her life with the horses' fates. She prays to mitigate against luck or fate: "O brace me, my groom. Pray for calm winds. / Carry me back safely where the snow stands deep in March. / I'm going home the old way with a light hand on the reins / making the long approach" (LA, 79, "The Long Approach"). While it is not exactly

clear who or what this deity is, there is, nonetheless, a strong implication that something out there can counteract fate or chance, and can guard against loss.

Much of the language in Kumin's poetry reinforces her sense of a divine force or being. Threaded throughout her poetry are casual and fleeting images and phrases connected to religion--formalized or otherwise--as well as a sense of spirituality seeking a home. There are also, of course, in numerous poems, more extensive images connected with religion. The presence of spiritual language and imagery is constant. In "The Sound of Night" (H, 18), "Crickets / chorus hallelujahs...." In "The Rites" (H, 43), Kumin terms love "A new machine / for redemption...." "Morning Swim" (P, 3) has the poet humming hymns while swimming. "This Praying Fool" (P, 27) implores "Dear absent God, receive / this praying fool I am"--a praying fool, maybe, but still praying after all. "Ballade for the Virgins" (P, 35) addresses the "Goddess" while "To An Astronaut Dying Young" (P, 42) tells the astronaut: "Your kind of death is out of God's world." The priest "has put God into [her] pain" in "Pain:1967" (NF, 73) and "The Nightmare Factory" (NF, 93), includes part of the children's prayer "if i should die before" I wake. In Up Country: Poems of New England, the poet notes that she is "standing on Bible Hill" in "Cross Country by County Map" (UC, 23) and as previously mentioned, she addressed the "God of the topmost branch" in "The Hermit Prays" (UC, 7). House, Bridge, Fountain, Gate

includes such poems as "The Jesus Infection" (HBFG, 23), "Living Alone With Jesus" (HBFG, 25), and "To Swim, To Believe" (HBFG, 31). The Retrieval System features "The Longing to be Saved" (RS, 5), "Address to the Angels" (RS, 7), and "Body and Soul: A Meditation" (RS, 43). "Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief" (GT, 3), maintains that: "On the cloud-pack above, strewn / as loosely as parsnip / or celery seeds, lie / the souls of the unborn," while "Itinerary of an Obsession" (GT, 22) describes a nun saying "'Pas loin...fingering her rosary / and pointing up." The Long Approach tells of the poet's mother "playing / the Methodist church organ for weddings" (LA, 5, "The Chain") and includes a poem entitled "In The Upper Pasture" (LA, 64), a word play on "The Upper Room," site of the Last Supper of Christ and His disciples. These examples provide an indication of the consistent attention that Kumin pays to religion/spirituality/God.

The search for religious absolutes is satisfied, to some extent, as the poet observes the sense of order inherent in nature. "Stopped Time in Blue and Yellow" (GT, 13) speaks to the sense of order which unifies things. Addressed to a child, or more likely, a lover, this poem celebrates violets, the blues and yellows of nature, the "stopped time" or the appreciated, held moment, and love;

Today the violets turn up blue
in the long grass as ever
a heaven can, the sea-calm color

of promises ballooning into view...

Today under the blue line
that covers your pulse I feel
the small purling sounds
your body makes, going on.

In this imagistic poem, Kumin connects the blue of the violets with "stems long enough to lace / around your oval wrist" and "the blue line" that covers her lover's pulse--the stems of the blue flowers similar to the blue stem of the pulse. While the poet realizes that time cannot be stilled, she savors the moment of flowers and of love in full bloom: "Time squats in the blue-spurred grass / like a yellow blister / and love in the long foreplay of spring / follows skyblue after." Although time here is represented as pain or an injury--"yellow blister"--something suppurating, the "skyblue" of spring follows redeemingly. In nature, after loss or injury comes renewal; it is only a matter of time.

A conceit, "Stones" (UC, 21) speculates upon the logic of the way in which stones shift: "The moving of stones, that sly jockeying thrust / takes place at night, underground, shoulders first." Kumin anthropomorphizes the stones, insisting that they move purposefully of their own accord:

The doors of my house are held open by stones
and to see the tame herd of them hump their

backbones

as cumbrous as bears across the pasture in
an allday rain is to believe for an afternoon

of objects that waver and blur
in some dark obedient order.

There is some sort of "dark obedient order" governing the motion of stones, similar to the image in Frost's "Mending Wall." There is an order in their movement at any rate; it is not random though it may be an order not readily discernable.

Kumin's recognition of a "dark obedient order" leads her to see and to accept the underside of life--unpleasant at best, and malevolent at worst. One must accept--in a Dionysian fashion--the fact that birth and life are not possible without complementary death. One must accept life-cycles, as "Strut" (LA, 63) makes clear:

Every morning I rethink how common green
--pond scum, a thousand sumac sprouts
brome and rye grass, birdsfoot trefoil
milkweed, poke, dock, dill, sorrel

bush and shrub, soft and hardwoods, all
leafy headed--must go down again in
frost and come again. Is this a deep
head-tilting meditative thought, or

vernal instinct, nothing more?

Whatever it is, the growth cannot occur unless the plants "go down again in / frost...." The variety and comprehensiveness of green which the poet uses, the catalog of living things, emphasizes the fact that this is life in general to which she is referring: all living things come out of some kind of frost or another. Without the killing frost, regeneration and preparation for the new season and for new life will not, cannot occur. The order of nature is manifest here as well:

Here come the marbled rat-wet new foals
blowing blue bubbles like divers into air
on their feet in minutes finding

the mares' teats by trial-and-error blind
butting stagger-dance. And here comes
cakewalk cocky with the whole mess
of birth and rebirth the strut of the season.

Almost bliss.

"Almost bliss," not total bliss, because even the "rat-wet new foals" will eventually succumb to the killing frost. In the midst of pleasure at life, one must not forget that there is an underside that will eventually claim its own. But life will come again from the underside; the violence will have a purpose. Ries contrasts the often-malicious violence of the human world with this necessary violence of

the natural world:

The first kind of violence is that injury, whether physical or psychological, that man inflicts upon his fellow man. The second is the spontaneous and powerful energy which belongs to the natural order; although this force may be terrible and dangerous, it is also a source of life.... Natural violence...springs from primal energy and touches man insofar as he partakes of the powerful forces in nature. Such violence is as often a source of strength and creativity as of destruction. The violent act of this kind is most often found removed from social situations....³³

"Five Small Deaths in May" (UC, 30) further illustrates the Dionysian reality that life will come from death. The first death is the mole's, who "has swum too far / downstream from the tunnel and drowned / in the pond." As "his eyepits blacken,"

Now the sun can sink
into those two particulars
and eat away the last wires.

As the mole decays, and the sun "eat[s] away" the body, it is reabsorbed into the earth, recycled. The second death is that of a meadowlark egg; a milksnake "has drunk the

³³ Ries, 5-7.

good yolk up," gains sustenance from this death. The third death involves minnows who are caught by a heron so that "scooped up they go down whole / exchanging one wet place for another." Part of the food chain, the minnows continue the heron. The fourth death is as the owl ingests "his nightly mouse," leaving nothing more than "a flake of leg, a chip of rib / a tuft of hair." The fifth death is of "Dog":

I will not sing the death of Dog
 who lived a fool to please his king.
 I will put him under the milkweed bloom
 where in July the monarchs come
 as spotted as he, as rampant, as enduring.

It is interesting that the poet "will not sing the death of Dog," as if she refuses to praise his death, having praised the others'. Nevertheless, the dog's death, as well as the other deaths which have occurred in May will give rise to rebirth in July; the dog is renewed as the monarchs who are "as spotted as he." In July the monarchs will have left their cocoons to blossom fully: dog blossoms at the same time--his cocooning has given rise to the butterflies as well. While there is death in this poem--and much of it--there is much life as well, as the life-cycle continues.

In addition to seeing an underside in nature, Kumin also finds human elements in the natural world: in a number of poems she anthropomorphizes the trees, plants, and animals that are the subjects of her poems. The poet's spiritual search includes an attention to the ways in which human beings can coexist in harmony with the natural world, and her use of personification as a poetic device underscores that search. "Regret" (GT, 9) treats:

all those tag ends of human
 speech the insects imitate
 hanging their odd inflected
 buzz, free-standing and misheard
 in still air over this field;

all those annulled connections
 all those missed chances
 and time running out untested
 hot and headlong like the voles'
 slim tunnels in this field

As the poem's epigraph--a quotation from Roethke--notes, "The field's no longer simple; it's a soul's crossing time." Thinking of and perhaps looking at this field, the poet's mood is reflected as she reads in nature: "tag ends of human / speech," annulled connections," and "missed chances." The insects and the later "blowing field" and "leaf clatter" are representative of the poet's very human presence. The regret of the poem's title may refer to the

fact that in this mood the poet is unable to see the field for what it is, for the natural beauty there. Instead, she reads human disappointments and failures into nature.

"In The Company of Trees" (HBFG, 48) personifies the trees which are its subject, but in a more playful fashion. Some of the trees are described as animals: the willow has "elephant eyes" and "mouse toes." And "beech is a bakeshop." But the pine, the birch, the popple, and the elms are described in human terms: the pine is "an old bull pine uncle"; the birch and popple are "thin as Bombay beggars"; and "The elms die but are buried upright / like Parsees." In describing the elms as "Parsees," the author imbues those trees with a religious significance as well. As the Parsees choose to be buried upright in accordance with their religious beliefs, so the elms may have some choice in the matter as well, or so the poet seems to implies--the elms are more than trees here. In a similar vein, "On Digging Out Old Lilacs" (HBFG, 50) likens the lilac bushes to "dead athletes":

I stand in a clump of dead athletes.

They have been buried upright

in Olympic poses. One

a discobolus clutching a bird's nest.

One a runner trailing laces of snakeskin.

One a boxer exploding toads of cracked leather.

To uproot these "dead athletes" one must "chip up kneecaps and scapulas / Knuckles and hammertoes." "A New England

Gardener Gets Personal" (LA, 71) personifies ordinary garden vegetables. "Kale / curls. Laughs at cold rain," while:

Willynilly
 after years of no-peppers
 a glut of them
 perfect as Peter Piper's.
 Only piccalilli
 will get shut of them.
 None grow riper
 none redden in this clime
 but such sublime
 pectorals! Such green hips!
 No Greek torso could be
 more nobly equipped.

The attitude of playful celebration toward this bounty of green peppers is reinforced by the poet's use of rhyme in this stanza and indeed, throughout the poem. The rhyme scheme is sing-song-like and a bit zany: willynilly/piccalilli, peppers/Piper's/riper, them/the, clime/sublime, hips/equipped.

Kumin's personification of the various elements of nature reflects her searching for a way in which human beings can be incorporated into nature. For Kumin, the purest form of human being is the one who is able to be one with nature, who is able to leave the unseemly aspects of being a human being aside, while seeking to find the

"animal" in him- or herself. The poet searches for a reunion with nature: a state of being within which she feels at one with nature, having left behind the human-based qualities of cruelty, greed, etc. For the poet, a better version of the familiar story would be the prince who is kissed and turned into a frog, that being preferable to a human state.

One way in which human beings can attain a preferred "less-human" state is through making love. Several of Kumin's poems describe the ways that woman and man transcend the human state while making love. In "We Are" (NF, 57), the poet and her love fully become part of nature:

Love, we are a small pond.
 In us yellow frogs take the sun.
 Their legs hang down. Their thighs open
 like the legs of the littlest children.
 On our skin waterbugs suggest incision
 But leave no marks of their strokes.
 Touching is like that. And what touch evokes.

Not singly, but together, the poet and her love "are a small pond." The possibility of procreation in the act of love is reflected in the image of the "littlest children," the children here signs of the fruits of procreation as well as of the beginnings of life. The images of fertility/fecundity/ continue in the second stanza:

Just here the blackest berries fatten
over the pond of our being.

It is a rich month for putting up weeds.
They jut like the jaws of Hapsburg kings.
Tomorrow they will drop their blood
as the milkweed bursts its cotton
leaving dry thorns and tight seeds.

Here, plants bloom and bear fruit. In addition, the image of blood and the image of bursting milkweed--implying semen, ejaculation--implies a progression of menstrual blood and birth, of life-fluids. Together the poet and her lover have the possibility of growth through the act of procreation, through birth, and through a purifying unity with nature. The unity and the possibility of growth which the two realize helps to mitigate also against encroaching death. If one sees oneself as an integral part of nature, then one can see the possibility of one's life being continued through the life-cycles of nature:

Meanwhile even knowing
that time comes down to shut the door
--headstrong, righteous, time hard at the bone
with ice and one thing more--
we teem, we overgrow. The shelf
is tropic still. Even knowing
that none of us can catch up with himself
we are making a run
for it. Love, we are making a run.

The "Love" here addressed includes not only the lover, but also the emotion of love (love of each other and love of nature) and the act of love. In "Turning To" (UC, 32) the poet compares her love and herself to frogs. As the two make love:

We lie
 ruffling mouth to mouth
 making one shadow

 two lukewarm frogs
 content with the single wardrobe
 of our skins

The two lovers are unified with nature as they "become" frogs, and are unified with each other as they "make one shadow." The unity with nature also leads the poet to realize:

and like frogs
 we are to be overturned
 by any stone heaved in the puddle.

We are to be taken down straightway
 by the hog-nosed snake
 or snipped up to accommodate the heron.

Being one with nature--though it provides a comfort in terms of recognition of life arising from death--does not offer the possibility of escape from death; death will come, whether it be in the form of the "snake" or the

"heron." But the poet is ready to live with the knowledge of approaching death:

Meanwhile

let us cast one shadow

in air or water

our mouths wide as saucers

our tongues at work in their tunnels

our shut eyes unimportant as freckles.

The poet would live "making one shadow" with her lover. Though she knows death to be approaching, she will not allow that knowledge to interfere with her leading as full a life as possible:

Let us turn to, until

the giant flashlight

comes down on us

and we are rammed home on the corkscrew gig

one at a time

and lugged off belly to belly.

Interestingly, when death comes in this extended metaphor, it is in the form of encroaching human beings who come to kill the frogs that they may indulge their palates. The manner in which death comes, as the frogs are "rammed home on the corkscrew gig," seems particularly cruel and painful. And in a perverse turn on the fact that the poet and her lover escape their humanness through the act of

love, the frogs here are violated by the "corkscrew," and "lugged off belly to belly," which position imitates a lovemaking position. Once again, human beings are the harbingers of death.

"Together" (NF, 58) describes the poet's transformation from human being into fish as she and her lover couple. In this poem the water is amniotic and the act is a baptism, a renewal, a rebirth:

The water closing
 over us and the
 going down is all.
 We convert in a
 town of broken hulls
 and green doubloons.
 O you dead pirates
 hear us! There is
 no salvage.

Kumin's attitude toward human beings and their trappings is revealed as she terms the people in the poem "dead pirates," speaks of a "town of broken hulls," and even speaks of "green doubloons," coins tempered by the sea. In a spiritual sense, as the poet and her lover consummate their love, they "convert" from human beings to what Kumin sees as a higher form of life:

All
 is salt. See how
 our eyes have migrated

to the uphill side?
 Now we are new round
 mouths and no spines
 letting the water cover.
 It happens over
 and over, me in
 your body and you
 in mine.

Love can redeem the two--at least temporarily. It "take[s] away all that is human" (HBFG, 92, "Eyes").

Kumin also feels unified with nature through water. As she swims, the poet senses herself a part of the life-force and in rhythm with nature. Certainly water imagery is associated with all of the various fluids which continue life--semen, amniotic fluid, milk, blood. Through swimming the poet feels at one with nature and recaptures a sense of solitude within nature. In "Morning Swim" (P, 3) as the poet swims nude at dawn, becoming a creature of nature: "Fish twitched beneath me, quick and tame. / In their green zone they sang my name." Here her incorporation into nature is reflected in the fact that she seems able to communicate with the fish of the lake. "Quarry, Pigeon Cove" (P, 52) provides a sense of the poet as renewed by a communion with, and an experience in, the water. She leaves her human trappings behind as she enters the water:

Frog fins strapped to my feet,
 a teaspoon of my own spit in the mask

to keep the glass from fogging,
 and the thumbsuck rubber air tube in my mouth,
 I slid in on my stomach,
 a makeshift amphibian.

The poet births herself--with "thumbsuck rubber air tube"--
 into a creature of the water. As she swims, far under the
 water-surface, she sees "a dog swimming...and splashing"
 above her:

Air eggs nested in his fur.
 The hairless parts of him bobbed like toys
 and the silk of his tail blew past like milkweed.
 The licorice pads of his paws
 sucked in and out,
 making the shape of kisses.

This dog swimming overhead leads the poet to an epiphany.
 Something new is created in her, as revealed by the images
 of the "nested air eggs," "the hairless parts of him,"
 "milkweed," and the "shapes of kisses." Seeing this land
 creature swimming blithely above her leads the poet to
 realize anew the possibilities of land creatures being
 incorporated into the water so that:

After that,
 the nap of the surface resettled.
 Mites danced on both sides of it.
 Coming up, my own face seemed beautiful.
 the sun broke on my back.

The poet would seem to be forever changed, "the sun br[eaking] on [her] back" as if she is newly born.

Of all her poetry, the sequence poems most describe Kumin's longing for a unity with nature. For in these poems she demonstrates a quest and a struggle to recapture an Edenic solitude. Including the poems to Thoreau, the hermit poems, the Henry Manley poems, and the Amanda poems, the sequence poems detail Kumin's pursuit of a solitude which brings her into harmony with nature. Though each of the sequence series manifests its own persona, the personae are linked and they form a progression. Notably, the sequences tend to come along in chunks, so that--for the most part--a sequence is written and then not returned to (however, the Henry Manley poems violate this tendency). The poems to Thoreau--which number three, significantly fewer than the number of poems in the other sequences--appear as the earliest manifestation of sequence poems, one each in Halfway, The Privilege, and Up Country: Poems of New England. The hermit poems number eight and appear exclusively in Up Country, with the exception of two poems which appear in House, Bridge, Fountain, Gate. The Henry Manley poems, numbering seven, are included in The Nightmare Factory (1), The Retrieval System (5, including one which was also published in The Nightmare Factory), and Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief (2). (N.B.--for the

collected volumes, only the new poems within the volumes will be included.) The Amanda poems--eight in number--appear exclusively in House, Bridge, Fountain, Gate. Clearly, there seems to be a progression in Kumin's taking-up and then moving-away-from a sequence of poems. And while there are commonalities between other poems--the poems to/about Sexton, to/about Kumin's brother, the Kentucky poems--they have not been included here as they do not share a common/specific persona, and in the case of the Kentucky poems, they have been discussed elsewhere in this analysis. The Sexton poems and the poems to Kumin's brother, while all concerning the same individual, do not share a common theme other than the theme of loss; the sequence poems here included reveal a common and evolving attitude toward nature and toward the outside world: these poems, these sequences, show a connection and a progression.

In The Modern Poetic Sequence³⁴ M.L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall discuss what has become the answer to reworking the long poem, the poetic sequence:

The modern sequence...is a grouping of mainly lyric poems and passages, rarely uniform in pattern, which tend to interact as an organic whole. It usually includes narrative and

³⁴ M.L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall. The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genius of Modern Poetry. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.

dramatic elements, and ratiocinative ones as well, but its structure is finally lyrical. Intimate, fragmented, self-analytical, open, emotionally volatile, the sequence meets the needs of modern sensibility even when the poet aspires to tragic or epic scope. (The intimate character, the strong sense we have of a highly subjective impulse of lyrical energy at work, makes it helpful to refer to the poem's 'speaker' or 'protagonist.' Since this usage is more a convenience of critical discourse, very easily misleading, than a key to aesthetic structure, we must remember that we are not dealing with a literal speech or monologue or poeticized discourse but with something like a piece of music.) The intimate, self-conscious tonality is often present from the very start.... It establishes an initial poetic pitch more than a theme or character. The pitch may change; so may the level of diction, the points of reference, and the contexts of evocation. The poem creates its own dynamics, in fact, whether or not it has a specified dramatic speaker.³⁵

Kumin often makes use of this overwhelmingly unrecognized form, so that, while they work as individual

³⁵ Rosenthal and Gall, 9.

poems, the parts of the sequence become synergistically magnified--greater than the sum of their parts. An early sequence, the Thoreau poems begin with "My Quotable Friend" (H, 38), a festschrift poem to Thoreau, celebrating his spirit and his versatility:

so kneed and knived
by students extracting the metaphor,
let me forget to nibble at
whose ax you borrowed: on which date
you went to jail; who paid the tax;
and blink instead to see you stump
out in thick night, Concord to hut,
.
guessing your route between tight-fitted
pines, as though the narrowest sort
of doorway, with a blind man's wit.

Kumin honors Thoreau for the innate sense allowing him to negotiate in a night forest, for his adventurousness leading him to flee society for the sanctity of Walden, and for his zest for life. It is his attitude toward Walden that is significant, and not the details of "whose ax [he] borrowed":

I bless your curses on
all tillage that requires more
than a day's work for a month of bread.
Swearing and sweating in your own cause
until you came to say it was

not beans you hoed, nor you that hoed
 them in the stony rows, I see
 you moving close and mindlessly
 to loving the backbreak of yourself.

Here Kumin feels that Thoreau transcends himself so that "it was / not beans [he] hoed, nor [he] that hoed / them." Kumin would also seek to transcend her own human nature, "loving the backbreak" of herself so that in a version of a military bootcamp she is decimated that she might be recreated. Thoreau "mov[es] close and mindlessly" through Walden in Kumin's account, becoming one with nature, with the earth: Kumin would emulate him.

The second of the three Thoreau poems, "Sleep" (P, 60), takes Walden as its subject. Walden is here identified as a place of Edenic solitude which, at this point--in the poet's second book--still eludes Kumin.

Somewhere is Innisfree,
 is Zion,
 somewhere a womb
 opens inward,
 a kind whale whose stomach room
 is warmly moist
 and undangerously brown.
 I am fighting fiercely
 for it by lying down.

Walden is a refuge and Thoreau, by association, someone who has broken the code. He has found solitude.

"Beans" (UC, 26), the third of the Thoreau poems, presents Thoreau as a person who approaches being a deity. As represented in this poem, he even had the ability to manipulate nature:

Standing pat
 on his shadow
 hoeing every noon
 it came to pass
 in a summer long gone
 that Thoreau
 made the earth say beans
 instead of grass.

Thoreau is presented here as having the ability to bend nature to his will. His representation as a person who has transcended to almost become a deity is heightened by the use of biblical language in this stanza: "it came to pass." Or perhaps more accurately, In this poem, Thoreau seems to be an Adamic figure in Eden before the fall. Kumin's attitude toward and reverence of Thoreau is made manifest in her terming him "You, my gardener," and then professing, at the poem's end: "I say beans / at your touch": such language emphasizes the power Thoreau has over the poet--a power which is that of a savior/mentor/teacher:

You, my gardener
 setting foot
 among the weeds
 that stubbornly reroot

have raised me up
 into hellos
 expansive as
 those everbearing rows.

Kumin's recognition of Thoreau as spiritual ancestor is evident in this passage.

From the poems to Thoreau, Kumin progresses to the hermit poems. The hermit poems reflect the poet's further turning to nature and away from civilization and human beings. With the hermit poems, the sense of a common, specific persona begins to clearly emerge. Although written from the perspective of a male persona, these poems directly portray Kumin's own attitudes toward the world and her efforts to escape that world for the solitude she needs not only as a human being, but as a writer.³⁶ In an

³⁶ Similarly, Emily Dickinson--by her own definition--"bearded" her pronouns (as quoted in Barbara J. Williams's "A Room of Her Own: Emily Dickinson As Woman Artist," in Feminist Criticism: Essays on Theory, Poetry and Prose, ed. Cheryl L. Brown and Karen Olson (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1978): 69-91). Williams notes that Dickinson "demonstrated a rare and subtle awareness that her economic (and political) impotence was the birthright of her sex...." (p. 70). "To be a woman--a vocation and an art, quite literally, in the nineteenth century meant that one had to deny self; to be a poet, as Emily Dickinson defined it, meant a lifetime of spiritual exploration to the end of self-discovery. [During her "boyhood"] the highest of premiums was placed on self-improvement, and she learned to live by that premium. Then as a grown woman, she was expected to disenfranchise her selfhood. She discovered that her worth was not to be determined by her own efforts; it was to be defined by destiny" (p. 72). It is little wonder that Dickinson selected an empowered, masculine poetic self, given the constraints upon women in nineteenth century America. It is interesting too, that while Kumin began her poetic career employing male

interview conducted at Interlochen Arts Academy, Kumin discusses the hermit poems:

If I were writing them today [1977], I would not employ the male persona. But when I was writing them I did not think that anyone could take a female hermit seriously, so I invented the hermit who, of course, is me.³⁷

An earlier persona than that found in the Amanda poems--which persona is at one with nature--evolves in the hermit poems, whose speaker reacts against civilization, consciously seeing himself as a hermit, isolated from society. "The Hermit Wakes To Bird Sounds" (UC, 3) represents the way in which the hermit makes sense of his world, intermingling the sounds of nature and of technology:

He startles awake. His eyes are full of white
light.

In a minute the sun will ooze into the sky.

Meanwhile, all the machines of morning start up.

The typewriter bird is at it again.

Her style is full of endearing hesitations.

The words, when they come, do so in

the staccato rush of a deceitful loveletter.

personae, her later poetry moves away from this necessary empowering--the escaping of Juhasz's "double-bind." As Kumin empowers herself and rejects patriarchal values, she sheds the male persona.

³⁷ Prairie, 25.

A measure of his desire to escape the trappings of civilization, the hermit transmutes its machines into natural objects; even neighbor Kumin's typewriter becomes transformed into a living part of the natural world. The hermit's attitude toward people is reflected in the fact that Kumin uses the image of the "deceitful loveletter," as if to detail one of the reasons that the hermit left people behind. The unity of nature and of technology is also reinforced by the other "birds" in the poem: "the sewing machine bird," "the bird who presides at the wellhouse," "the logging birds," and "the grouse [who] cranks up / his eternally unstartable Model T."

"The Hermit Picks Berries" (UC, 8), presents a hermit who is living in harmony with nature:

At midday the birds doze.
So does he.

The frogs cover themselves.
So does he...

The snake uncoils its clay self
in the sun on a rock in the pasture.
It is the hermit's pasture.
He encourages the snake.

Here the hermit seems a creature entirely of nature, acting simply and directly with the other creatures of the field. But he has not lost or yet given up his reliance on

civilization: "The hermit whistles as he picks [blueberries]. / Later he will put on his shirt / and walk to town for some cream." Delicious as the berries are, they are improved upon by the cream--here available only by interaction with civilization. Though the hermit has, for the most part, left people behind him, has chosen a solitary life, he cannot escape the need to venture out of his wilderness from time to time. The other hermit poems also represent this persona who prefers to live away from other human beings yet finds the necessity of foraging into their world from time to time. Though the hermit is a solitary creature, he is unable to totally flee other human beings and the things they have to offer, much like the poet who would live in isolation on her farm that she might write, but also that she might feel synchronized with nature; yet she must venture into the outer world to teach and to give readings. The hermit persona is the poet.

In contrast, although the character of the Henry Manley poems is not the poet directly, the poet admires him greatly. Henry Manley is a self-sufficient, plucky, survivor:

My neighbor in the country, Henry Manley,
with a washpot warming on his woodstove,
with a heifer and two goats and yearly chickens,
has outlasted Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill
but something's stirring him in his dotage.

(RS, 19, "Hello, Hello Henry")

Henry Manley does not feel the necessity of repudiating civilization, but rather, lives as--one might imagine--he has since his 19th-Century birth: his life is simple, closely connected to the earth, and does not include much in the way of modern "conveniences." But living still with a "privy" and a "well," Henry Manley decides to get a phone; though he has not incorporated modern conveniences into his life previously, Henry Manley, "stirring in his dotage," does not object to including that which suits him. And indeed, though his life is simple and probably close to the way in which his parents lived, other poems detail his "pickup" truck and "air rifle" (RS, 20, "The Food Chain") and "lawnmower " (RS, 21, "Extrapolations From Henry Manley's Pie Plant"). This man is at ease with the way in which his life combines the natural world and the civilized world.

"Henry Manley Looks Back" (GT, 5) details the ailing Henry who has broken his hip. The neighbors take in this seventy-six-year-old man who:

loves

his new life as the sage of yesteryear,
 its mythic blizzards, droughts and forest fires
 when he yoked oxen, killed bears, swilled
 applejack
 and in dense snow fog brought the milk cows back
 by single lantern....

This man is a survivor of mythic proportions, besting as he did all manner of hardship. Kumin admires him for his resilience and self-reliance, likely seeking to emulate him much as she might an elderly Thoreau. Henry Manley's resilience extends beyond the physical to a toughness of mind as well:

Meanwhile, porcupines
have entered Henry's house and set up camp.
Part of the caved-in roof now forms a ramp
for other creatures who've trooped in to raise
their young. Henry, having crutched there, says
'You can't look back,' and stands, bracing his
spine
against the door jamb of his lost kingdom.

Though the roof of his house has collapsed, his attitude is one of resignation rather than dismay; the earth is taking the house back into itself as if part of a larger plan--which fact Henry accepts. Kumin's admiration of this crusty, indomitable man seems clear: he is able to accept with panache the events of his life.

The Amanda poems seem most fully to represent the poet's attitude toward nature. Though this sequence was published prior to most of the other sequence poems, because it is the sequence which is most developed in terms of a persona which represents the poet, it will be discussed last. Kumin herself notes that: "In the Amanda poems...that's no persona; there's nothing between me and

the material."³⁸ The Amanda poems detail a life that is entirely unified with nature: it is a non-human life, and as such is a more completed version of the Thoreau, the hermit, and the Henry Manley poems. As there is no barrier between the poet and the persona in these poems, so too is there no barrier between the voice in the poems and nature. The mare is at one with her world; because she is not a human being, the mare has the possibility of unity with nature that is simply not possible for human beings. Though the poems are written with the voice of the poet, they provide an insight into Amanda's world that transcends human possibilities.

The connection that Kumin feels with her mare is clear in "Amanda Dreams She Has Died and Gone to the Elysian Fields" (HBFG, 88). The poet carefully details her perception of Amanda's being tied to all things:

This morning Amanda
 lies down during breakfast.
 The hay is hip high.
 The sun sleeps on her back
 as it did on the spine
 of the dinosaur
 the fossil bat
 the first fish with feet
 she was once.

³⁸ Prairie, 40.

In this instance, Amanda and not a human being, is represented as being the highest step in this evolutionary ladder. The mare seems at one with her world. In the second stanza--as if the poet were courting the mare--she "come[s] calling with a carrot." Having "taken the first bite," Kumin offers the carrot to the mare who:

accepts

as loose-lipped as a camel.

We sit together.

In this time and place

we are heart and bone.

For an hour

we are incorruptible.

Contact with her mare, communion such as this, causes the poet to feel at one with the natural world. It is not only Amanda who "Dreams She Has Died and Gone to the Elysian Fields," but also the poet who feels this way; for a short period of time the poet is redeemed from her lesser status of human being. Amanda is a pure soul whose company lifts the poet out of her humanness into a state of being more in tune with the world of nature.

For Kumin, horses hold particular significance. Many poems in addition to the Amanda poems contain references to her various horses. Kumin sees the horse as a symbol of the possibility for human beings: horses are "honest through their inability / to lie"; they are beautiful, graceful, powerful. Kumin speaks to her love of and bond

with horses in "Why Is It That Girls Love Horses?"³⁹ From her childhood on Kumin was enthralled with horses: "It didn't especially matter to me whether I rode or not; I was happy just to be in the presence of horses. I wanted to inhale them, and I wanted them to take me in." She recalls a book, Silver Snaffles, from her childhood. A fantasy, this book tells of Jenny, a little girl who is temporarily allowed access into a fantasy-world where the horses are articulate, "with good English country-squire manners." But eventually Jenny "must relinquish her right to the magic password and to the dark corner of Tattle's stall, through which she has melted every evening into a better world. I thought it was the saddest ending in the history of literature." Kumin comes across this book again as an adult and finds herself weeping at the outcome:

I think I was crying for my lost childhood, but I'm still not sure. The cathartic effect of the book was not assuaged for me by Jenny's acquiring a pony of her own. Nothing would compensate for the loss of innocence, of the ability to speak the password and walk into a kingdom of virtue and honor. The deprivation that I felt when the female hero was denied continued access to Paradise was the loss of an intensity, a closeness for which I have no adequate words.

³⁹ Ms. Apr. 1983: 17-19.

This bonding, I believe, lies at the heart of horse fever.⁴⁰

From her childhood on the poet has been enamored of horses and they seem to have come to symbolize a way that one can attempt to regain a lost innocence, regain a glimpse of Eden. And horses provide a stable mitigating force against the rest of the world. In speaking to the reasons that young girls love horses Kumin notes:

I do not blink at the fact that a horse often comes into a young girl's life at a time when she feels a need to take control in some measure of what is essentially an uncontrollable environment. The key factor is that an animal's responses can be counted on. When all else shifts, changes, and disappoints, the horse can remain her one constant. Her best friend may turn against her; fickle boys forget their admiration; siblings bicker with her; parents exact too ardent a fealty. Her favorite teacher may suddenly grow aloof. The violence of the real world, the threat of nuclear war, the poverty and deprivation she is at least peripherally and probably acutely aware of, all intensify her sense of inadequacy to deal with these inequities. By comparison, the horse is

⁴⁰ Ms., Apr. 1983: 17-19.

predictable, manageable, kindly.⁴¹

But the merits of horses do not exclusively attract young girls. From her poetry--as well as from her life--one senses that horses will always be important to Kumin for additional, reasons:

The bond with horses, no matter its origin, is enjoyed ultimately for its own worth. I like to think that my own obsession serves a greater good. Living with horses reminds me daily of my place in nature. Tending them, training, riding or driving them links me with my tribal past. My mother, who was born before the automobile and electric lights and lived to her eighty-fourth year in a nuclear age, remembered with piercing clarity the names and dispositions of all the horses of her childhood in rural Virginia--the driving team, the plow horse, the hackney pony, the delivery wagon mules. In a way, then, I am keeping the faith, taking my rightful place in the continuum.⁴²

Clearly, to Kumin, the horse is more than merely a corporeal animal. Consequently, the Amanda poems are reflective of the poet's attempt to regain a lost innocence, a lost communion. Contact with Amanda is

⁴¹ Ms., Apr. 1983: 17-19.

⁴² Ms., Apr. 1983: 17-19.

redeeming: "O Amanda, burn out my dark. / Press the warm
suede of your horseflesh / against my cold palm. / Take
away all that is human" (HBFG, 92, "Eyes"). Through her
association with Amanda, the poet feels redeemed from the
depraved human state. The poet has reached a type of
ultimate unity with nature through this mare.

Kumin's nature poems reflect her search for a
spiritual home, not found through organized religion. In
turning to nature, the poet develops a theology entirely
her own: there is comfort to be had in observing the
processes and the regularity of nature; there is hope for
eternal life in understanding life-cycles and the continuum
of nature; and there is an innocence and a purity in nature
which offers much to mitigate against the atrocities
committed by depraved human beings. There is much to be
found when one turns to nature for comfort. Kumin's nature
poems reflect not only the search for meaning, but also the
finding of it.

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