

# Reflections on Poetry and the World



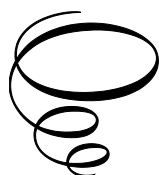
# Reflections on Poetry and the World:

*Walking along the Hudson*

By

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Reflections on Poetry and the World: Walking along the Hudson

By Emily Grosholz

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This book is an homage to *The Hudson Review*, so it is dedicated to the memory of Frederick Morgan, the founding editor and husband of Paula Deitz who became his co-editor and since 2004 has been the editor, and is one of my dear friends. I would also like to thank Ronald Koury for his many years as managing editor, as well as associate editor Zachary Wood and assistant editor Eileen Talone. Further thanks go to Dana Gioia who introduced me to Fred and Paula in the first place when I was running a poetry series in New Haven long ago, and advisor editors David Mason and Mark Jarmon, who have all become friends. I'd also like to thank my graduate assistant Maria Bermudez for her help in preparing this book, along with her positive encouragement.



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**HUGE CLOUDY FIGURES OF A HIGH  
ROMANCE**

## MAXINE KUMIN'S POETRY OF METAMORPHOSIS

In the title poem of *The Retrieval System*, Maxine Kumin brings together the family members who thickly populate her "tribal" poetry, and the animals, wild and domestic, who inhabit her farm and poems. Not only does she bring them together, but with the studied uncanniness of Ovid she allows them to combine, body and soul. Various critics have noticed the frequency with which Kumin writes about her family, and others have traced her practical and literary interest in animals. But in this essay I want to show that one of her most striking habits of imagination and language is to turn people into animals (and sometimes by a kind of extension, plants) and vice versa. This habit is so strange and so pervasive that it demands explanation, and any explanation will have to be as complex as Kumin's own motives for writing a poetry of metamorphosis. Why is it that Kumin can best represent her intimates and familiars, and even herself, by changing them into other creatures? How does transformation convey her understanding of and love for them? (Kumin rarely writes out of curious indifference; she chooses as topics those whose well-being directly concerns her.) What linguistic means does she use to carry out her transformations? What explanations of this poetic habit does she herself suggest? How does it allow her to construct poems at once personal and universal, domestic and political? The answers to all these questions, some concerning form and others more substantive, are inevitably linked.

When she combines people and animals in her poems, Kumin usually avoids the markers of simile, like and as, that point to a likeness in qualities while equally insisting on a difference in substance or kind and therefore emphasize the arbitrary construction of the author. Instead, Kumin uses other tropes that present the linkage as deeper-lying, more objective: these range from the stubborn side-by-sideness of zeugma to the half-and-half combinations of synecdoche to the full, fierce identities of metaphor. For Kumin doesn't wish to present her transformations as the poet's whimsical composition. Indeed, her tropes that are stronger than simile are often reinforced by gestures toward principles that explain how the transformations are possible. There are the principles of dream (with the tangent objectivity conferred on them by Freud & Co.), of myth (Native American, Greek, Buddhist, with the objectivity of tradition), of love (which forges the bonds

it imagines), and even of evolution. For one inference to be drawn from Darwin is that all animals are part of one great body stretching backward in time; we are really one flesh with our parents, and so on *ad finitum* to the Egg.

So then what is the point of so much poetic combination and fusion? On the one hand, I think it testifies to an emotional equivalence. Kumin cares as sharply about the animals, wild and domestic, that inhabit her New Hampshire farm as she does about her friends and family. The claims of animals and more generally of things that grow are no less compelling than human claims. So on the other hand, the metamorphosis has a broader import. We human beings are animals among animals, and we must not let our temperamental strangeness sever us from our fellows, from the earth.

## I

The first stanza of "The Retrieval System" is a good example of the way that Kumin merges human beings and animals in complex ways. The figure of synecdoche does all the work, though it is a strange synecdoche in which parts not only represent wholes, but representative parts are embedded in other, equally representative wholes.

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.<sup>1</sup>

Kumin doesn't write, "I remember my father's eyes!" so that his eyes, the windows of the son, can stand for him. Nor does she write, "My dog came over to me, and I thought, how like my father's eyes his eyes are." What she remembers is "my dog, now dead, who all his long life / carried about in his head the brown eyes of my father!" The dog's eyes are identified with (not just likened to) her father's eyes, and her father is revived by his fleshly representation in the sockets of a living, beloved household pet. The import of the trope is then that the metamorphosis is not just something she made up but something she encountered, involuntarily and with perhaps a shiver. And it happened not just once and fleetingly but during all the long life of her dog.

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<sup>1</sup> Maxine Kumin, "The Retrieval System," *The Retrieval System* (New York, NY: Viking Press and Penguin Books, 1978), 1.

So the poet reports a brute, though strange fact of experience. Indeed, the word "Fact" begins the most important line of the whole poem, in the next to last stanza: "Fact: it is people who fade, / it is animals that retrieve them."<sup>2</sup> Even Kumin has to admit the strangeness of her facts. "Uncannily," she writes after recording the eyes of her father, "when I'm alone these features / come up to link my lost people / with the patient domestic beasts of my life."<sup>3</sup> She is also surprised by the voice of her former piano teacher blatted by her goat; the head of maiden aunts on her ponies; her lost baby sister's chin, squint, and cry in the cat; and shades of the television weatherman and her late dentist in a "resident owl." And she finds the exuberance of an old boyfriend (killed in World War II) in the antics of her colts.

A boy

I loved once keeps coming back as my yearling colt,  
cocksure at the gallop, racing his shadow  
for the hell of it. He runs merely to be.

A boy who was lost in the war thirty years ago  
and buried at sea.<sup>4</sup>

Here the synecdoche is even odder: there's no transposition of representative parts, but rather the whole manner of being and moving of the young horse is that of the young man: the boy comes back. He is a revenant, though not a ghost because he is embodied, except that the body is not his own. And while the experience is as uncanny as it is real, the poet is not frightened, for the yearling colt is warm with the pulse of life. Kumin never says that she loves the animals because they remind her of people she has loved; rather, because she already feels affection for the animals in their own right, they can embody and manifest her people.

Kumin's candidates for metamorphosis are often the loved and lost, sometimes through death, sometimes merely through distance. Daughters whose manifold departures she grieves over in poem after poem are often transformed into animals. In "Changing the Children," Kumin seems to invoke the fairy tale-folk tale tradition of the brothers Grimm, as she does in the closely related poem "Seeing the Bones," Kumin makes herself into a poetic witch, whose spells and concoctions, while fantastic, are not imaginary.

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<sup>2</sup> Kumin, "The Retrieval System," 1.

<sup>3</sup> Kumin, "The Retrieval System," 1.

<sup>4</sup> Kumin, "The Retrieval System," 1.

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

...the golden daughter  
 all arched bristle and quill  
 leaves scribbles on the tree bark  
 writing how The Nameless One  
 accosted her in the dark.

How to put an end to this cruel spell?

The spell is cruel, and the cure no less so.

In spring when the porcupine comes  
 all stealth and waddle to feed on the willows  
 stun her with one blow of the sledge  
 and the entrapped girl will fly out

crying Daddy! or Danny'  
 or is it Darling!<sup>5</sup>

I hear the lost voice of Plath in the exclamation "Daddy" and that of Sexton in "Darling!" If that is so, then the anxiety expressed by the poet, mother, and friend here is very great, and the process of transformation itself seems dangerous. But Kumin never shrinks from the aggression and anger that are mixed up in the tenderest parental (and filial) feelings. She gives them full expression, as of course the brothers Grimm also do, with the wisdom of the folk.

A daughter is invoked and transformed by verbal yoking, a kind of zeugma not at the level of word but of stanza, in two further poems, "Telling the Barn Swallow" (*Looking for Luck*) and "The Bangkok Gong" (*Nurture*). In both poems, the animals are presented in mother-and-daughter pairs, as the poet writes about her daughter who is always leaving to go somewhere far away. Why do the animals intervene so strongly in these poems? Why does Kumin not simply elaborate on themes like, "My child is leaving, and so I am sad" or even "My child is leaving me as a bird leaves the nest"? The role of simile to decorate or even to articulate seems inadequate to the poet's purposes.

In the first poem, while her daughter plays the cello outdoors at sundown, the poet puts up strawberries, and a barn swallow flies around them.

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<sup>5</sup> Kumin, "Changing the Children," *The Retrieval System*, 30.

The sun is going down, the crows announce it.  
 Only the barn swallow continues to zig zag  
 between the cello's double-stops.  
 She comes with a mouthful of mosquitoes  
 For the budvase beaks of her nestlings  
 banked in the overhang.

It is the same old sloppy nest.  
 She keeps sieving the air for them.  
 They are her second setting this year.  
 I tell the bird this is my child  
 fierce now in the half light  
 at her harmonics. I tell the bird  
 how this cello has crossed and recrossed  
 the Atlantic in its coffin and next week  
 will cross again, and forever.<sup>6</sup>

(Her daughter is about to marry and live in Europe.) Kumin is both talking to herself and addressing the barn swallow; the four speeches she directs to the bird make sense only if they are understood as a reminder and admonishment both to herself and to the bird. This doubling in the address, as well as the way the poems cuts abruptly back and forth between the mother brooding over her daughter and the swallow and her brood of hatchlings, induces an identification.

Both Kumin and the mother barn swallow will be there later, on the occasion of other sunsets, when their children have flown. Kumin encompasses the bird; the bird's fate impinges directly on her own, as her own fortunes seem to matter to the bird.

My daughter plays Bartok to the arriving fireflies.  
 The swallow settles over her foursome.  
 I tell the bird to cover well her hatch.  
 I tell her that this hour  
 must outlast the pies and the jellies,  
 must stick in my head like a burdock bur.<sup>7</sup>

"Cover well your hatch" is an appropriate thing to say to a bird, but it invokes the poem's central anxiety: the daughter, whom the poet worries has not been properly "covered." "This hour / must outlast the pies and the jellies, / must stick in my head like a burdock bur" is a much odder thing to

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<sup>6</sup> Maxine Kumin, "Telling the Barn Swallow," *Looking for Luck* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1992), 74.

<sup>7</sup> Kumin, "Telling the Barn Swallow," 75.



say to a bird; the poet must assume that the bird shares her concerns. The problems of maternity are not peculiar to the human race; the speaker here is both a human and an avian mother. The fierce attachment of a bur is something the carrier always notices, like, one imagines, a mouthful of mosquitoes.

But the bird, or the poet addressing the bird from the inside, is a source of solace to herself. "Fact: it is people who fade; / it is animals that retrieved, the homing flight of the barn swallow will be the visual equivalent of the sound of Bartok played on a lone cello at sunset. It will always bring back the music and musician, "fierce now in the half light," as Kumin's dog ( even after his own demise, in the timeless hour of poem or dream) brings back the eyes of her father.

Likewise, the same daughter, now even further flown and truly in danger, comes back by metonymic association with the gift she leaves behind, the Bangkok gong. Yet the metonymy is not enough, and the gift is further metamorphosed into a mare and her colt.

Home for a visit, you brought me  
a circle of hammered brass  
reworked from an engine part  
into this curio...

The tone of this gong  
is gentle, haunting, but  
hard struck three times  
can call out as far  
as the back fields...<sup>8</sup>

Kumin might have left the poem there, with the invocation, "I strike the gong to call you back home." But a metal curio, however ingenious or resonant, is too inert and cold for Kumin; her figures must be alive, capable of intention and attachment and sorrow. So she transforms the gong by asserting that its reverberation is speech.

When barely touched it imitates  
the deep nicker the mare makes  
swiveling her neck  
watching the foal swim  
out of her body.  
She speaks to it even as

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<sup>8</sup> Maxine Kumin, "The Bangkok Gong," *Nurture* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1989), 57.

she pushes the hindlegs clear.  
 Come to me is her message  
 as they curl to reach each other.

Now that you are  
 back on the border  
 numbering the lucky ones  
 whose visas let them  
 leave everything behind  
 except nightmares, I hang  
 the gong on my doorpost.  
 Some days I  
 barely touch it.<sup>9</sup>

The extraordinary moment of birth is at once a separation and a reconnection, since the infant willingly and instinctively turns back to its mother to nurse; then in a new and different sense they are again one body. Kumin treats this moment and double movement recurrently in her poetry and essays. Despite the pain of separation, Kumin realizes that one reason her daughter is so far away is that she is acting like her mother and reforging the bond between them. The same sense of civic justice and responsibility to the earth that leads the daughter to work for the UN, helping Cambodian refugees, leads the mother to work on a small farm in New Hampshire and record her life there for all the rest of us. The interpretations differ, but the text that governs them (something like the golden rule) remains the same.

## II

Another person who is regularly subject to metamorphosis throughout Kumin's poetry is Anne Sexton, Kumin's best poetic friend, who committed suicide in the middle of her life. In "Itinerary of an Obsession," Sexton appears in a dream side by side with her own "lovesick dog [that] chases a car / the twin of yours and lies dead / years back in a clump of goldenrod."<sup>10</sup> In "On Being Asked to Write a Poem in Memory of Anne Sexton," Sexton becomes an elk and her gifts and demons the "heavy candelabrum" of antlers.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Kumin, "The Bangkok Gong," 57.

<sup>10</sup> Maxine Kumin, "Itinerary of an Obsession," *Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Viking Press and Penguin Books, 1982), 22.

<sup>11</sup> Kumin, "On Being Asked to Write a Poem in Memory of Anne Sexton," *Nurture*, 36.

In "Progress Report," Kumin presents her friend (like her daughter) under two totemic aspects, bird and porcupine. Encountered as objects, the bird recalls Sexton's spirited, graceful, dramatic side; the porcupine, her fury. Encountered as ideas, as acts of awareness in the presence of objects, the bird and porcupine belong to Kumin as well; they manifest her great love and the anger of her bereavement.

Memory reunites us with the dead, for the vivacity of our grief at their absence brings them to life in us. (Even when we are alive, much of our being is the way we are present in other people.) But here Kumin is not content to write, "I remember and miss my friend." Animals must once again be the figural way in which the friends are reunited, in which they encounter each other. Nor does she write, "My friend was so much like that tanager." Instead, the tanager is in the poem, and the two friends are reunited in virtue of its being there, as creature and as apparition. Oddly, the tanager as creature brings back the dead friend; the tanager as apparition calls up the living.

The same scarlet tanager  
as last year goes up, a red  
rag flagging from tree to tree,  
lending a rakish permanence to  
the idea of going on without you

even though my empty times  
still rust like unwashed dogfood cans  
and my nights fill up with porcupine  
dung he drops on purpose at  
the gangway to the aluminum  
flashed willow, saying that  
he's been here, saying he'll come  
back with his tough waddle, his pig eyes,  
saying he'll get me yet. He is  
the stand-in killer I use  
to notarize your suicide  
two years after, in deep spring.<sup>12</sup>

Although the poet knows, and writes explicitly in the midst of the poem, that her conversations with her lost friend now require her to take both parts, the poem presents Sexton in her irreducible, unmistakable otherness. The penultimate stanza of "Progress Report" relates a dream, where two of the distinctive qualities that made Sexton what she was and is, shine through:

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<sup>12</sup> Kumin, "Progress Report," *The Retrieval System*, 15.

her penchant for long telephone calls and her wisdom about the human heart.

The poem "The Green Well" turns the open graves filling up with snow in the last line of "The Retrieval System" into "the green well of losses, a kitchen midden / where the newly dead layer by layer / overtake the longer and longer vanished."<sup>13</sup> The poem begins on Kumin's farm, just before sunrise in early summer; the poet muses on the obvious fact of death as she removes from the top of the feed bin a squirrel freshly killed by her own cats and deposits it in the manure pile, the green well. Through a series of interpolations in that meditation, Sexton is transformed into a mare who died in childbirth. "Gone," Kumin writes,

now to tankage my first saved starveling mare  
and the filly we tore from her in the rain.

After the lethal phenobarb, the vet  
exchanged my check for his handkerchief.  
Nine live foals since and I'm still pocked with grief,  
with how they lay on their sides, half dry, half wet ...<sup>14</sup>

Immediately after these lines and so without any extra transition, the quotation "Grief, sir, is a species of idleness" appears as an admonition to the poet, perhaps to stop standing there in tears and get on to the other business of the farm. But the voice is Sexton's, though it is also Bellow's.

Grief, sir, is a species of idleness,  
a line we treasured out of Bellow, my  
suicided long-term friend and I.  
All these years I've fought somehow to bless

her drinking in of the killer car exhaust  
but a coal of anger sat and winked its live  
orange eye undimmed in my chest  
while the world buzzed gossiping in the hive.

That mare a dangerous runaway, her tongue  
thickly scarred by wire. My friend too  
fleeing her wolves, her voices those voodoo  
doctors could not still nor save her from...<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Kumin, "The Green Well," in *Looking for Luck*, 32.

<sup>14</sup> Kumin, "The Green Well," 32.

<sup>15</sup> Kumin, "The Green Well," 33.

The interpolations run: the mare, the friend, the mare, the friend; the poem offers no words that soften the juxtaposition except the "too" in the second line of the stanza just quoted. The death of the mare at the moment of birth and of the friend at the height of her powers enclose each other in these lines, as Kumin's meditation encloses them. Only the memory of the great, warm body of the mare cooling in the rain and the poet's immediate awareness of the decomposition of bodies can provide a faithful counterpart to Kumin's feelings about, her half-understanding of, her friend.

The poem returns to its initial setting in the final stanza. But there is no cheerful reconciliation; the transformation of Sexton into mare and mare into meadow does not stand for the resurrection of the soul. Not a hint of it.

The cats clean themselves after the kill.  
 A hapless swallow lays another clutch  
 Of eggs in the accessible nest. It does  
 Not end with us, though end it will.<sup>16</sup>

There is, however, another side to this meditation in the poem that precedes it by a few pages in *Looking for Luck*, "Praise Be." An essay in *Women, Animals, and Vegetables* tells us that *Praise Be* is the name of the granddaughter of a saved starveling mare with a scarred tongue. The first two stanzas are the record of a successful birth, and the last stanza proclaims,

Let them prosper, the dams and their sucklings.  
 Let nothing inhibit their heedless growing.  
 Let them raise up on sturdy pasterns  
 and trot out in light summer rain  
 onto the long lazy unfenced fields  
 of heaven.<sup>17</sup>

This heaven is the earthly paradise that we can sometimes create if we are lucky and try hard and pay attention. In another essay in the same collection, "A Horse for Fun," Kumin reminds us that a great deal of work and sympathy are required to take care of a horse properly, as well as knowledge gleaned from both experience and books. Sentiment and faith will not succeed alone, though they are also needed. Here is Kumin's benediction, on the flown daughter and the lost friend, and the Real, which disappoints

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<sup>16</sup> Kumin, "The Green Well," 33.

<sup>17</sup> Kumin, "Praise Be," *Looking for Luck*, 23

us by being less than we expected and delights us by offering more than we ever dreamed of.

### III

Kumin does not just turn her lost loved ones into animals (and lost loved animals into people). She also metamorphoses herself, the most intensely present person in the poems. Quite often the explanation of that metamorphosis is myth, though, of course, for Kumin the authority of myth seems to lie rather more in the human traditions that produced it than an independently existing transcendence. In "Reviewing the Summer and Winter Calendar of the Next Life" (in *Nurture*), she uses the Buddhist myth of the transmigration of souls. This myth elongates the self through time by means of the soul, as Darwin's theory elongates the self through time by means of the body. In the poem, Kumin muses that she may next be plunged in various animal bodies, depending on the season in which she dies: "If death comes in July, they'll put me down / for barn swallow"; or by contrast,

In January, I'll get to pick and choose  
among the evening grosbeaks bombing the feeder  
in a savage display of yellow scapulars  
or return as a wild turkey, one of the brace  
who come at a waddle at 10 A.M.  
punctual comics, across the manure pile  
for their illicit fix of feedbin corn  
or join the juncos, whose job description involves sweeping up after-  
everybody else,  
even venturing in to dust the stalls  
of the barn for stray or recycled specks of grain.<sup>18</sup>

A soul transmigrating in New Hampshire (halfway between Katmandu and Jerusalem) ought to go into a winged creature, the closest natural analogue we know to angels. Yet the logic of the poem is not so simple, for in the last stanza Kumin formally requests not to be brought back as a weasel and by the very urgency of the request admits a kinship with that devilish, reptilian mammal: "Rat-toothed egg-sucker, making do / like any desperate one of us."<sup>19</sup> Whatever the outcome, this change will not be a change of place; all the options set forth bring the poet back home to her own farm.

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<sup>18</sup> Kumin, "Reviewing the Summer and Winter Calendar of the Next Life," *Nurture*, 52.

<sup>19</sup> Kumin, "Reviewing the Summer and Winter Calendar of the Next Life," 52.

In each of the three stanzas of "Reviewing" the theme of feeding recurs; Kumin notes the ceaseless struggle of all these creatures to feed themselves and their offspring. Throughout Kumin's writings a fascination with food appears at many levels, and she often uses our relentless need for it to equate human and animal bodies, as does the myth in the foregoing poem. One of the poems that lead off her *Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief*, "Feeding Time," records her evening provisions for domestic and wild animals around the farm and then for herself and her husband and the shades of grown-up children around the dinner table. The poem makes little distinction: we are animals among animals.

Myth returns and involves the poet in the first and last poems of Kumin's most recent book of poetry, *Looking for Luck*. In the first poem, "Credo," Kumin begins by invoking an Indian legend.

I believe in magic. I believe in the rights  
of animals to leap out of our skins  
as recorded in the Kiowa legend:  
*Directly there was a bear where the boy had been.*

As I believe in the resurrected wake-robin,  
first wet knob of trillium to knock  
in April at the underside of earth's door  
in central New Hampshire where bears are...<sup>20</sup>

There may really be a boy in the bear, just as Kumin's old dog really carried the eyes of her father. Indeed, the last poem in the collection, "The Rendezvous," attests that there may really be a poet in the bear, the poet herself, and indeed a bear in the poet. The figure of speech here is perhaps chiasmus, since there is both a fusion and a mixing up of parts; it is surely not simile.

In "The Rendezvous," the poet meets a bear, and in a dance that is part magic, part love-making (which is yet another way we have of being one body with another), they prepare to merge: he is about to enter her and she is on the brink of wrapping up in a delicious, animate fur coat.

How I meet a male bear.  
How I am careful not  
to insult him. I unbutton  
my blouse. He takes out  
his teeth. I slip off  
my skirt. He turns

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<sup>20</sup> Kumin, "Credo," *Looking for Luck*, 15.

his back and works his way  
out of his pelt,  
which he casts to the ground  
for a rug.

He smells of honey  
and garlic. I am wet  
with human fear. How  
can he run away, unfurred?  
How can I, without my clothes?

How we prepare a new legend.<sup>21</sup>

In the new legend, we might recognize our animal body beneath the clothing of soul and the animal soul beneath the fur body and create a harmony different from our present dissonance, where we shun, ignore, slaughter, torment, and compute our animal companions.

Kumin also, inevitably, turns herself into a horse. The change works sometimes with respect to soul, sometimes to body, sometimes without making the distinction. The review of her poetry so far should make clear that Kumin on the whole tries to avoid the distinction. When she invokes soul, it is quite thoroughly embodied, and when she invokes body, it is quite thoroughly ensouled. And often she reaches for a language in which the distinction doesn't register. In the poem "Late Snow" she writes:

Inside, I hear the horses knocking  
aimlessly in their warm brown lockup,  
testing the four known sides of the box  
as the soul must, confined under the breastbone.<sup>22</sup>

The season is early spring, and the snow, like Housman's, is also tree blossom, though in this case apple rather than cherry. A few lines later the horses emerge into the fields, and the soul exults, now acknowledged as the poet's own and, as in the lines just given, precisely housed. The horses

... do not know how satisfactory  
they look, set loose in the April sun,  
nor what handsprings are turned under  
my ribs with winter gone.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Kumin, "The Rendezvous," *Looking for Luck*, 91-92.

<sup>22</sup> Kumin, "Late Snow," *The Retrieval System*, 49.

<sup>23</sup> Kumin, "Late Snow," 49.



The poet's attention to her own soul requires the horses; their initial restiveness and final exuberances is her expression of herself to herself.

A few pages later in the same section of *The Retrieval System*, the poet's attention to her own body also acquires an equine presence. During sessions of yoga, memories of her Catholic school education (which bore oddly on a young Jewish girl) and echoes of the Old Testament come back to her, and the poem "Body and Soul: A Meditation" concludes,

Body, Old Paint, Old Partner  
in this sedate roundup we ride,  
going up the Mountain in  
the meander of our middle age  
after the same old cracked tablets,  
though soul and we touch tongue,

somehow it seems less sure;  
somehow it seems we've come  
too far to get us there.<sup>24</sup>

If the relation between self and body is that of a skilled rider and a contented horse going together along an unfamiliar trail, then the poet is a centaress following not unskeptically in the footsteps of Moses.

The centaress and the same locution occur also in the poem "Relearning the Language of April" (*Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief*), which testifies to a long-lasting marriage in which the pleasures of body and soul are finally indistinguishable. Kumin's husband strides through the first four stanzas, rather like Orpheus in a garland of charmed animals and plants, the circuit of their fields. And in the concluding pair of stanzas, Kumin seems to be writing from the farm's heart, the farmhouse perhaps, where she stays on thinking of him.

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

Once more, Body, Old Paint,  
how could you trick me like this  
in spring's blowsy arms?<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Kumin, "Body and Soul: A Meditation," *The Retrieval System*, 45.

<sup>25</sup> Kumin, "Relearning the Language of April," *Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief*, 12.

The earthly paradise is satisfactory. Not merely satisfactory but productive of deep and abiding satisfactions like the company of animals, the reliability of fertile and well-tended land, the allegiances of marriage, the resources of the English language, the figures of poetry.

## Conclusion

It is not easy to write a poem that expresses a deep attachment. The poet can choose either contraction or amplification. Concision may work well, for deep feeling can often be tacit and gestural, something that lies too deep for words, to which a few well-chosen words may point. Yet Kumin trusts the power and accuracy of words: deep feeling, including grief, demands expression, and that utterance is not in vain. I would say that, on the whole, Kumin's tendency is to amplify and that her metamorphoses serve this purpose.

A poet's description of a loved person in a poem by means of a decorative simile doesn't produce much intensification of understanding and feeling. The more inert or conventional or merely pretty the term of comparison, the more artificial and arbitrary the joining, the less the reader is moved and the loved one is called back into the poem. Clever similes can be compounded and extended *ad libitum* without any corresponding increase in the poem's emotional import and its purchase on reality.

By contrast, Kumin's metamorphoses of people into animals are especially effective means of conveying her attachments, quickening them, revealing their meanings, and enlivening the reader's feelings. Her terms of comparison are creatures to whom she is also bound by strong, sometimes overpowering affective ties. So, her transformations create a compounding of distinct but analogous feelings, a redoubling that does not obscure but clarifies. And as I have argued earlier, the connection between animal and human being is not presented (at the level of either language or thought) as the poet's willful construction but as an identity encountered in its stubborn thereness—the boy in the bear, the father-eyed dog, the winged friend, the centauress-self. Thus, Kumin's poetry of transformation produces a record of devotion unexampled in the strangeness of its means and in the great power of its effects.

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## MILOSZ AND THE MORAL AUTHORITY OF POETRY

What authority does poetry have in the present age? Czeslaw Milosz often poses this question in his essays on literature and poetics, history and philosophy. He sees humankind threatened by proliferating universals, the necessities of scientific and social theory which seem to negate the integrity of the individual, as they usurp the claims of poetry to truth. Thus as a theoretician he is attracted to metaphysical systems like those of the Russian philosopher Lev Shestov and the French philosopher Simone Weil, which pose the human soul as a radical particular allied to a transcendent good in opposition to social and natural necessity. He can then ground his practical concerns as a poet in a kind of poetic nominalism. The authority of poetry stems from its courageous witness that necessity does not engulf us; poetry is the voice of the individual free to pursue the good, which in fact establishes the good by speaking.

Milosz was raised in the forests of Lithuania, began his studies in the provincial capital of Wilno, and moved to Warsaw, where he spent the war years as a member of the Polish Underground formed in resistance to the German occupation. He survived the Warsaw Uprising (in which the Red Army waited and watched the Polish resistance destroy itself in futile combat with the Germans before entering the city), was caught up by the Russian takeover of postwar Poland and defected to the West five years later. After a decade in Paris as an itinerant man of letters, he accepted a professorship at Berkeley, where he has remained since, an emigré and exile.

Some poets in the United States have regarded Milosz with a strange mixture of admiration and jealousy. They blame the peripheral status of poetry in this country on the surface all values are relative. Anyone can say anything, and no one pays much attention. By contrast, Milosz was privileged to live in the midst of great events, war, the collapse of civilizations, repressive occupation, in which writing a poem could be a heroic gesture, a genuinely moral act, the expression of objective value. In such situations, when poetry claims the authority of truth, it can become as necessary to the populace as bread, and the romantic-modernist isolation of the poet is abolished.

Milosz cannot be blamed for this naive assessment of his example by people who have never suffered the disruption of the entire fabric of their society. His ironic and hopeful account of the relation of poetry to our moral and political interests belies such naivete. Yet his animosity towards the universal is so intense, and his insistence on the particular and transcendent so radical, that his advice to us is less useful than it might be.

In this essay, I would like to engage Milosz's moralizing poetics with my own alternative account, which relates poetry to the social, everyday activity of moral deliberation and makes it easier to see the possible authority of poetry in ordinary as well as cataclysmic situations. Though I will make reference to a number of his books, I will concentrate on his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, *The Witness of Poetry*, a full-dress statement of his poetics published by Harvard University Press in 1983, and to some of his poems available in English translation in his revised *Selected Poems* (The Ecco Press, 1980).

Briefly, I agree with Milosz that "scientific" social theories which pretend to reduce particular cases to necessary universal principles endanger our moral education and impugn the status of poetry. But I see our best recourse against the tyranny of necessity not in the radically particular and transcendent, but in social discourse and the spirited embodiments of everyday life. Poetry can be authoritative to the extent that it helps us discover the good. But discovery of the good is an unending social process of deliberation about values, which are always, in the phrase of W. B. Callie, essentially contestable. The very meaning and import of values are worked out in the offensives and defenses which modulate and regulate each other in practical deliberation. As we deliberate about what to do, we are constructing social reality. We are also involved in a process which continually adjusts universal principles to particular cases, without the domination or disappearance of either. When poetry in the United States fails, its inadequacy is then best understood as a failure of eloquence and phronesis, prudential wisdom. Nonetheless, poetry can play an important role in moral deliberation, and in what follows I will examine this role more closely.

## I

In *The Captive Mind*, a book written shortly after his departure from Poland, Milosz discusses the effect of the Russian controlled Marxist regime on Polish writers of his acquaintance. "Alpha the Moralizer" was a haughty, austere personality who admired purity and wished to be recognized as a moral authority. He tended to write novels of ideas, insufficiently rooted in

experience and observation of life. In underground Warsaw, his writings on the ethic of loyalty and self-sacrifice inspired many of the young people who were to be among the two hundred thousand slaughtered in the Warsaw Uprising. Milosz relates that Alpha's first postwar novel contained oversimplifications at odds with his richly ambiguous experiences in the war. The Communist regime imprisoned large numbers of resistance fighters who had been allied with the London government-in-exile; although they had been fighting Hitler, they were now called class enemies. (Precisely the same fate awaited Communist resistance fighters in Greece.) Yet Alpha depicted them in his novel merely as lost souls, incapable of hearing the good news offered by the protagonist, a fearless old Communist.

Beta the disappointed lover of humanity made his literary career in postwar Poland by writing a chilling account of his experience as an upper caste prisoner in Auschwitz. (The Party welcomed all anti-Nazi literature at the time.) He described how the less clever and aggressive perished, while he managed to keep himself warm and well-fed. Life in the camp appears as Hobbes's state of nature, each individual pitted against all the others, without sympathy or conscience, stripped of the illusory habits of civilization. And yet, Milosz points out, fellow inmates who knew Beta in Auschwitz say that he often acted with courage and compassion. The extreme brutality of his stories disguised his principle of selection.

Milosz accuses Alpha and Beta of failing both as artists and as moralists. Indeed, the two kinds of failure cannot be disentangled. Because they didn't capture the depth and complexity (the moral reality) of the characters, their work is morally unedifying and also bad art. They have reduced their characters to angels, demons or animals. We have nothing to learn from such types, which are intrinsically good, incorrigible or simply amoral and so incapable of enlightenment or degeneration. They cannot be used to think through the meaning of moral principles brought to bear on difficult situations. Neither do they compel our attention or compassion; as works of art, they are inert. We are not tempted to inject ourselves imaginatively into these adventures, rounding out the story in reflective hindsight: What if she had acted otherwise? What would I have done in that situation? If only ... No genuine moral tension calls us back into the story; we simply do not care enough to return to it. Our evaluation of an author's display of moral imagination is at once an aesthetic and an ethical judgment.<sup>1</sup>

The long terrible silences of the war incited a whole generation of postwar Polish writers, Milosz among them, to give expression to what they and others had experienced. Dialectical materialism was a theodicy which

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<sup>1</sup> Czeslaw Milosz, *The Captive Mind*, translated by Jane Zielonko (Penguin, 2001).