

Maxine Kumin: How It Is

I sent out a poem by James Dickey, "The Bee," which was about maleness, about fathers and sons, about being a jock, about the continuity of life. Here is a poem by Maxine Kumin which might be called a polar opposite, since it deals with friendship that borders on sisterhood, since it is about women, since it deals with death rather than life. Both poems, opposite as they are, focus on the ongoing relations between human beings and the importance of those relations.

Before we embark on the poem, let me provide its context. Anne Sexton, the brilliant confessional poet, was perhaps Kumin's closest friends. They had met at a poetry workshop when both were suburban housewives discontented with the lack of direction in their lives. Over several decades they worked together – each writing poems very different from the other – as colleagues in the shaping and revision of their poems. Sexton, a 'confessional' poet, had difficulties and breakdowns, extensive psychotherapy and bouts of what we might in an unprofessional way called madness. Throughout these years, their friendship endured.

Each week they met together over lunch. On October 4, 1974, after their lunch, Anne Sexton went home and killed herself by asphyxiation, carbon monoxide poisoning, in her garage.

The 'you' in this poem is Sexton. The events in the second stanza are those of October 4, 1974.

How It Is

Maxine Kumin

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.
In the left pocket, a hole.
In the right, a parking ticket
delivered up last August on Bay State Road.
In my heart, a scatter like milkweed,
a flinging from the pods of the soul.

My skin presses your old outline.
It is hot and dry inside.

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 bits 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 meat.

Dear friend, you have excited crowds
with your example. They swell
like wine bags, straining at your seams.
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.

The poem is a memorial to and remembrance of the poet's relationship with her deceased friend. It is an unconventional form of elegy: it celebrates the deceased, but focuses primarily on the grief of the survivor, on what that grief feels like "a month after your death."

Before looking at the poem's content more closely, let's notice two things, its versification and its verse tenses. Technical, I know, but they are a way into the poem.

First, the use of rhyme. Although it may read like it is largely in free verse the poem like the blazer which is its ostensible subject has a shape, here provided by rhyme. That rhyme is more extensive than we at first perceive: jacket/ecstatic, hole/soul and the slant rhyme, Road/milkweed in stanza one. In stanza two, paste/unlaced, collage/garage, fish/sandwich, space/place. In stanza three the s's provide slant rhymes linking the first five lines (crowds/swell/seams/words/stains) and a strong slant rhyme concludes the poem in lines six and seven (cloth/death). Alliteration further binds the final two lines: 'r' in ribs/durable/blazer, 'b' in "blue blazer" and the very strong 'd' of durable/dumb/death.

Second, the verb tenses indicate that the stanzas are in the present, past, and future tenses. Stanza one is about the present. The tense of the verbs is the present in which the poem's speaker puts on the blazer that was once her friend's: is/recognize/presses/is.

Stanza two is a re-envisioning of the past, starting in the present ("think") and moving to the past through a tense that a grammarian would call the future unreal conditional. That is, for those of us who are not grammarians, the poet reimagines the past by using the verbs 'would' and 'could'. The past not as it was, but as it would or could have been.

The final stanza begins with the past tense – "you have excited crowds," moving to the present as "crowds...swell," only to end up in the future tense: "I will." Although the final line is about putting on the blazer, something the speaker has done at the opening of the poem, it refers to the future of putting on that blazer in a more metaphorical, and at the same time more real, sense.

Back to the beginning of the poem, where the speaker starts with a question about her existential condition as she puts on her friend's blue blazer.

Shall I say how it is in your clothes?
A month after your death I wear your blue jacket.

The speaker then provides us with concrete details. Her dog sees the jacket and responds to it, as if Sexton were still alive. In dog-think, the clothes *do* make the man, or in this case woman. "The center of my life"? The dog, her daily companion, yes: but this phrase also points us towards the center of her life that is no more, is no longer present. The blazer is there, on her shoulders, covering her arms and chest. But while the speaker fills the jacket, what she feels throughout the poem is emptiness, absence. The line about the dog makes, by ironic contrast, the emptiness visible.

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

Kumin then details the jacket, what it feels like to have put it on. These lines emphasize the emptiness by fortuitous synecdoche (a part standing for a whole) : "a hole". Another emblem of absence, the past that no longer has relevance in the ongoingness of the world: that "parking ticket," unpaid, will now never be paid. Again, there is irony: the mundane past is retrieved only by

happenstance, and without effect. The significant past, that which the speaker must retrieve, will be the subject of the second stanza.

In the left pocket, a hole.
In the right, a parking ticket
delivered up last August on Bay State Road.

The link between the first and second stanzas is built as the concrete gives way to the symbolic, rendered through a simile:

In my heart, a scatter like milkweed,
a flinging from the pods of the soul.

The imagery warrants scrutiny. Since her friend's death, Kumin's heart is in a state of dispersion. Her heart is compared to a milkweed pod that splits and is caught by a fall gust¹. What the pod contained is now scattered to the winds, light feathery elements dispersed into the air. So too is the poet's heart dispersed, without its center (despite the reference to the dog). The poet puts on the blue jacket, a thing of substance, and feels at her core like she is disintegrating, like her heart and soul are no longer single, substantial, coherent.

What does she experience, precisely, as she puts on that tangible and recognizable jacket and considers her inner inability to hold things together?

My skin presses your old outline.
It is hot and dry inside.

Clothes shape themselves to us². So the poet can feel her skin pressing the outline of her friend's body which shaped. What is gone – clearly, Anne Sexton – is still present in not just the jacket but also the poet's life; at the same time, what is gone is absent. It is not Sexton who occupies the jacket any longer.

¹ It is worth recalling that milkweed pods ripen and split in fall, and that the poem commemorates the death of Sexton at the beginning of October and the month succeeding when Kumin tries to comprehend what that death means. Milkweed pod season.

² I have written previously about one of Pablo Neruda's great late odes to everyday things, his "ode to a Tomato." Another of the great odes is called "Ode to My Suit," and deals with this very subject. In it he says,

I am shaping you,
poking out your elbows,
wearing you threadbare,
and so your life grows
in the image of my own.

Inside the jacket is a desert climate, inhospitable to growth, indicative of what has deserted the jacket, and the poet as well. There is something unsettling about the proximity of the *outline* and the *inside* in these two lines.

Let us recapitulate. The poet asks herself if she can articulate what it is like to inhabit her friends clothes. Her dog thinks the poet's friend has returned, the pockets contain the detritus of a life (that parking ticket) and an emptiness (that hole), her heart and her soul feel dispersed and fragmentary, her skin presses into a shape that reflects – like that hole in the pocket – what is gone, she feels hot and dry.

The second stanza commences with memory and how the past could have been different. Could have been. But wasn't, as the third stanza will make clear. This second stanza claims to be based on collage. But is also based on film (“unwind it”). How can this be? Well, the stanza proceeds in the poet's memory as if it were a home movie played backward --is based, not on the collage it refers to, but on a home movie³. Which can be played backward. Which should be played backward. Although we know, as the poet knows, that time in actuality does not move backward.

I think of the last day of your life,
old friend, how I would unwind it, paste
it together in a different collage,

I had difficulty at first figuring out why it was a collage and a movie, figuring out how it could be both. But the juxtaposition is not so strange: what the stanza does is play the last moments of Sexton's life backwards, but it does so as a series of images. And because the images are in a different chronological order – “backward”—they feel both right and pasted together.

The home movie begins:

back from the death car idling in the garage,
back up the stairs, your praying hands unlaced,
reassembling the bits of bread and tuna fish
into a ceremony of sandwich,
running the home movie backward to a space

³ We are far from the days of home movies: today it is all videos, whether on taken by a camera or a smartphone. The strange, humorous game of home movies, playing them backwards through the projector so the world is both familiar and strange, is probably not as common a phenomenon as it was when the poem was written. The humorous aspect of backwards-projection, and the tragic circumstances Kumin is relating, give this stanza great power, I think, a power which can be felt in the absurdity of the sandwich reassembling itself.

we could be easy in, a kitchen place
with vodka and ice, our words like living meat.

“Back from the death car” needs no gloss: it was both the instrument of Sexton’s carbon monoxide asphyxiation, and the vehicle which carried her forward to her death, unmoving in actuality but moving her towards the absence the poem struggles to deal with. (It was also, in some sense, her coffin.)

But we might pay attention to the next line, “back up the stairs, your praying hands unlaced.” The poet imagines her friend praying as she moves toward her death, and the moments before her prayer, when perhaps purpose was pushing her to descend the stairs and turn on her car’s motor, but a full awareness of what she was about to do had not come to consciousness⁴. Suicidal but not unreligious.

Then, comic relief, an ironic setting for the tragedy, the tuna fish sandwich, disassembled as she bit into it and chewed it, is made whole in the backwards-funning movie. It is reassembled into “a ceremony of sandwich,” the speaker’s first tribute (there will be two more) to their friendship, to the ceremonial aspect of their weekly meetings. The ceremony? A secular communion, eating as they reminded themselves of friendship and poetry.

For that “running the home movie backward” takes the speaker back to “a space we could be easy in,” a space of friendship, sharing, a quintessentially domestic (and woman’s) space, the kitchen.

Not that even in the kitchen, with food and friendship, the world could be held at bay. There was vodka, to dull the pain, “vodka and ice.” But what they consumed, what they devoured, was words, “like living meat,” the shared commitment they had to writing about what they had experienced, about what they had to say, about how to say what must be said. “Like living meat.”

⁴ The first poem, “Rowing,” of Sexton’s book *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, contains these lines:
and now, in my middle age,
about nineteen in the head I’d say,
I am rowing, I am rowing
though the oarlocks stick and are rusty
and the sea blinks and rolls
like a worried eyeball,
but I am rowing, I am rowing,

The final stanza begins with a call to her friend, a reassurance – such as must have assuredly punctuated those weekly lunches – that her work mattered and made a place for itself in the world:

Dear friend, you have excited crowds
with your example.

That line, as I have mentioned, is in the past tense. The next line indicates that the phenomenon, Sexton's poetry and her life moving crowds of people, continues in the present.

They swell
like wine bags, straining at your seams.

I am not sure about the simile. It indicates the continuing and growing reception of Sexton's verse and the struggles she shared with her readers; the simile also indicates the cost there was to Sexton of having to lay her inner self, her troubles, her pain, before the world, as she – for now she and not the audience is the wine bag – 'strains at your seams.' Swelling admiration, motherhood (surely there is an allusion to pregnancy, and perhaps to the gestation of poems), alcohol (it is a wine-skin, after all): a synopsis of Sexton's life is in that comparison.

The poem ends in the future tense. At first it is factual. After death, there is the detritus of life to be sorted: "words...letters, snapshots, stains." Note that in the second stanza she has already arranged a brief collage of "snapshots," and the poem acknowledges that the work will continue for 'years.' That "gathering up" is begun, not ended, by this poem.

I am struck by the "stains," which reverberates from the marks on the blazer (surely there are some) to the episodes of excess and despair and mania that her friend endured, to the stain on the speaker's life – an ineradicable stain – of her friend's absence from the world and from the domesticity of that kitchen and from her life-to-come⁵.

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.

⁵ Note, too, that "stains" rhyme with "strains." Those trains were stains. But the stains are in this sense not marks of imperfection as they are the tangible record of experience in the world, which for Sexton so often were the strains of living.

I love the ending of this poem. It is, as I have written before, sometimes very hard to end poems. Not here. The final lines are a memorial to their friendship and a recognition of the finality of death.

I will be years...
leaning my ribs against this durable cloth
to put on the dumb blue blazer of your death.

In those final lines, the speaker is struggling to inhabit the fact of Sexton's death. She must inhabit it, and discovers that the death, like the blazer (only more so) is "durable." It lasts. (The origin of the word is from the Latin *durare*, to last.) It is not the blazer which lasts – although it has lasted beyond Sexton's death – as much as what it symbolizes, death. And it will take years – and years and years – for the speaker, Maxine Kumin, to put on the "dumb blue blazer of your death" that she so easily slipped her arms into in the second line of the poem.

For the blazer is dumb, without speech. So is our recognition that loss is durable and in fact life-long. The poem, which is I think speaks about the absence of her friend, ends in silence, in that "dumb flue blazer of your death."