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## Peeling Fence Posts and Other Poems

Maxine Kumin

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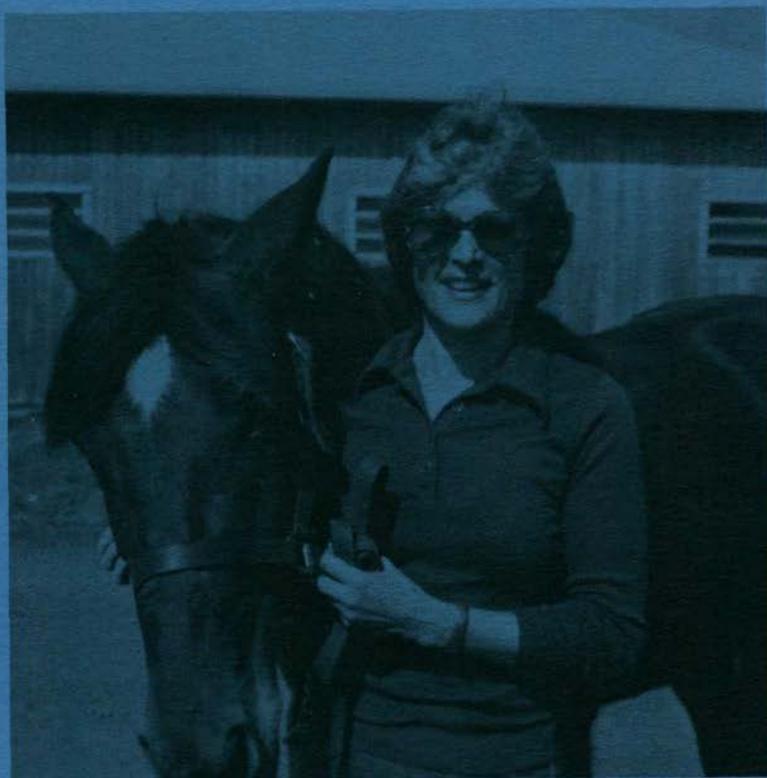
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*Peeling Fence Posts and Other Poems*

MAXINE KUMIN



—photo by Joyce Carol Oates

MAXINE KUMIN

## Peeling Fence Posts

Not till I hatchet a slice  
the long way, slow but sure,  
from the shagbark hickory  
does this tough customer  
shuck his warty slats  
like long underwear.

The agreeable yellow birch  
spooling her curls  
like a typewriter ribbon  
loosed from its socket  
lets go in spirals,  
in tendrils of neck hair

whereas, hard as it is,  
ash splits its skin clean,  
gives me a pry-hold,  
comes away like a glove.  
I finger the torso under,  
pale, wet, alive.

Turning brown as a tribe  
all stand leaning  
together in the barrel  
of oil deepened with creosote  
where, in rainbow blobs  
released from pith and cortex,  
their tree souls float.

## Relearning the Language of April

Where this man walks his fences  
the willows do pliés with green laces,  
eyelashes fly from the white plums,  
the gaunt elms begin to open their frames.

When he passes, lithe with morning,  
the terriers, rump-deep in a chuckhole,  
boom out to follow,  
the squirrels chirrup like cardinals.

Five prick-eared ponies  
lift from their serious chewing.  
The doomed cattle, wearing  
intelligent smiles, turn.

For miles around, the plowed fields  
release a sweet rancidness  
warm as sperm.

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 blowzy arms?

## Stopped Time in Blue and Yellow

Today the violets turn up blue  
in the long grass as ever  
a heaven can, the sea-calm color  
of promises ballooning into view.  
Stems long enough to lace  
around your oval wrist,  
small petal face  
the wash of Waterman's ink,  
vigilant cat's eye at the center  
yellow as the sluice box where cows drink.

Today under the blue line  
that covers your pulse I feel  
the small purling sounds  
your body makes, going on.  
Time squats in the blue-spurred grass  
like a yellow blister  
and love in the long foreplay of spring  
follows skyblue after.

## Never

*Good for you!* he calls  
beside me as I take  
the chicken coop, the in-  
and-out, the double oxer, all  
without sucking back,  
springing off my hocks  
as if at Ledyard,  
an Olympic champ.  
Down the mud slide I whirl  
clearing the drop jump,  
the one my heart  
lurches over, clinging  
to my soft palate  
where it thumps  
like a snared rabbit.

O heart, we are  
a pair of good girls  
hurdling the ditch  
at the bottom of the chute  
and up the other side, *good  
for you!* victorious  
not over fear, my lifelong boarder,  
morose skulker about the house,  
but over time. The large  
child inside leaps up  
for daddy's loud kiss,  
for daddy's lollipop.

Body on body riding hard  
*good for you!* I play to spin  
this game out to the end,  
never coming to the part  
where we stop,  
where the jumps are set  
too high, and darkness wins.



## An Unfinished Story

A habit I can't break, caring.  
In sleep the signs come on long as a freight train:  
a vestibule of old galoshes,  
squirrel bones in the wall  
and last of all, the college racing shell  
he used to flip up like an umbrella,  
this brother I love, in real life shrivelled  
by a disease that wastes the large muscles.

Tonight he strides in rosy-cheeked  
and eighteen in the pectorals  
to announce he has six months to live and plans  
for every hour: Pompeii, galloping  
the moors at Devon, The Great Wall,  
lots more sex. Further, he means to kill  
time with a perpetual-motion cell.

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 will wake to.

## The Incest Dream

Brother, the story's still unfinished; you  
struggle up as best you can,  
three-legged now as in the riddle of the Sphinx,  
the whole left side of you dumb  
to the brain's fiercest commands.  
Talking is problematical; vowels distort  
rising against the numbness in your throat.

Still, we've been out to dinner,  
assorted husbands, wives,  
and driving back through rain the sidewise swipe  
of memory delivers a lightstruck  
picture of us, 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,  
two savages spruced up for Grandma's Sunday  
in the roller chair.

Listen! I love you!  
I've always loved you!  
And so we totter and embrace  
surrounded in an all-night garage  
by theater-goers barking for their cars,  
the obedient machines spiralling down  
level by level as we block  
the exit saying our goodbyes,  
you tangled in your cane, my black  
umbrella flapping like a torn bat.

At 3 a.m. I'm driven to such extremes  
that when the sorrowing hangman  
brings me your severed penis still  
tumescent from the scaffold  
yet dried and pressed as faithfully  
as a wildflower  
I put it away on my closet shelf  
and lie back down in my lucky shame.