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Ted Kooser
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guest editor

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In honor of
Ted Kooser

PREFACE

First, I would like to express deep appreciation to Ted Kooser for his major contribution to American poetry over his distinguished career. Kooser is a poet of the first order. In his own poetry and as a supporter of poetry through his role as US Poet Laureate (2004-2006), as well as in his American Life in Poetry Project, he has inspired many with a love of verse. Through his efforts, he has introduced many new poets to the larger American public. Ted Kooser is also extremely generous with his time, to which a number of the contributors of this issue can attest. He is a poet who strives in his poetry and in his life to cultivate a close relationship with his readers. We are grateful for his contribution, "Those Summer Evenings," in this issue, as well as for the interview with him that appears here.

I would also like to extend my thanks to the contributors to this special issue of *Midwestern Miscellany*. We are especially fortunate to have Mary K. Stillwell's opening piece on Ted Kooser's use of chiaroscuro in his poetry. Stillwell is the foremost scholar on Ted Kooser today, and her forthcoming book-length study from the University of Nebraska Press of Kooser's career will further advance our understanding of Kooser's work. Wes Mantooth's study of Kooser's method of observation examines Kooser's close relationship to his readers and his mode of observation as a poet. Mantooth looks at Kooser's mix of incisiveness and tact as an observer. Allan N. Benn offers a reading of Kooser's *Valentines*, highlighting the complexity, richness, subversive play and hidden pleasures of these poems. Michael Anthony Istvan's "A Small Aid for Kooser Research" provides an indispensable guide for the study of Ted Kooser's career. Like a fine cartographer, Istvan surveys the scholarly terrain and offers a map that charts pathways for future study. We also offer readers and scholars a selected bibliography of the books that Ted has published.

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THOSE SUMMER EVENINGS

TED KOOSER

My father would, with a little squeak
and a shudder in the water pipes,
turn on the garden hose, and sprinkle
the honeysuckle bushes clipped
to window height, so that later,
as we slept atop our rumpled sheets
with windows open to the scritch
of crickets, whatever breeze
might flirt its way between
our house and the neighbors'
would brush across the honeysuckle,
sweet and wet, and keep us cool.

TED KOOSER'S WORLD: CHIAROSCURO,
BRUSH AND PEN

MARY K. STILLWELL

Ted Kooser, nearly always conscious of place, establishes the immediate world in which he lives and works before turning to his own story in his memoir, *Local Wonders* (2002). He begins his five-page preface by comparing Nebraska's west-to-east tilt to "a long church-basement table with the legs on one end not perfectly snapped in place, not quite enough of a slant for the tuna-and-potato chip casseroles to slide off into the Missouri River" (xi). Seventy miles to the west of that river lies the "north-south range of low hills known with a wink as the Bohemian Alps," home to the poet and his wife, Kathleen Rutledge, since the 1980s.

Kooser uses direct address and a conversational tone as he narrows his perspective geographically and topographically, developing intimacy with his reader while describing the lay of the land, the animals, birds, plant life, and small towns that dot these hills. "Go a mile and a half mile north" from the Garland bank corner, he invites, directing the reader to take the gravel road east a quarter of a mile, turn right, and continue three-quarters of a mile to his front gate.

Within the "big tin mail box," from which he has mailed his "letters to the world" for more than three decades, are the pages of *Local Wonders*, "carefully wrapped in clean butcher paper and tied with grocery string," postage affixed, waiting for pick up (xiv-xv). Kooser, whose home is at the end of a short lane, invites the reader into the seasons of his life, spring through winter, from his birth in Ames, Iowa, in 1939 to his brush with death from mouth cancer in 1998.

As the memoir opens, we catch sight of Kooser sitting alongside a country road in his '92 Mercury Topaz, "a rolling ['all-weather'] art studio," watching as "Fat slides of snow plop from the wet tin

roofs of turkey sheds” (3). He identifies himself as “an amateur painter,” then a “Sunday painter,” but pen and brush are soon conflated. Painting, he writes, is his way “of trying to be a tulip, pushing my way out of the tight white bulb of winter and opening a little color against the darkness” (3). This nexus of dark and light is Kooser’s aesthetic dwelling place, familiar to readers of his poetry.

Chiaroscuro, well known as a painting technique that renders form through the contrast of light and dark, has long been favored by Kooser. As a literary technique, chiaroscuro is, broadly speaking, an effect achieved by the juxtaposition of opposites (or extreme differences) to render meaning. Contrasting subject matter or aspects of theme, for example, can be juxtaposed: life and death, joy and gloom, pleasure and pain, or light and dark. Though chiaroscuro is most often associated with the visual, the technique may also be extended to the other senses as well. Symbols, meter, and sound may rely on chiaroscuro for their full effect. It is found throughout Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), as when Hester is described as “a black shadow emerging into the sunshine” (41-2).

Although integral to his work as a writer, Kooser’s interest and experience in the visual arts are not widely known. Before looking more closely at the use of chiaroscuro in his work, a brief overview of his history and engagement with painting and the graphic arts is in order. “Teddy,” as he was called as a child, began drawing, as most children do, before he learned to write. His father, Theodore Briggs Kooser, known for his own creative flair, introduced his son to the world of local artists, including Velma Rayness, whose house he pointed out on their walks around Ames. Although Kooser never met the portrait painter and arts educator, her life, as he imagined it, became an important source of inspiration for his own (*Local Wonders* 65-66).

The boy loved to draw and to paint and was encouraged both at home and at school, where his talent was recognized. In fourth grade, family friends gave him Robert McCloskey’s children’s book, *Lentil* (1940), which, he says, would become “the most important influence on my writing and life” (*Local Wonders* 141). In text and pencil drawings, McCloskey provided Kooser with a hero about his own age who, by hard work and persistence in practicing his art [playing his harmonica], finds his place in his world. The archetypal quality of the story and the marriage of image and word, no doubt height-

ened by his introduction to poetry the same year, were to take root and remain with him the rest of his life.

As a high school student, Kooser took formal art classes for the first time, and in the summer of his sophomore year, he began an apprenticeship with a local sign painter (Kooser, Ted. Personal interview. 12 Apr. 2011). He was best known, however, for the pin-stripping of his hotrod, Henrietta. About this time, he and his friends discovered the Beat poets, who were “hot,” and, according to a friend, “that’s what we wanted to be” (Krapfl). Kooser had already begun writing short lyrical essays, much like those that appear in *Local Wonders*.

After graduation, Kooser matriculated in the architecture program at Iowa State University of Agriculture and Mechanical Arts (now Iowa State University), where his course of study included basic drawing and watercolor (Kooser, Ted. Personal interview. 28 June 2006). To fulfill a college English requirement, Kooser enrolled in a poetry writing workshop with Will C. Jumper, who would become his first literary mentor. Although Kooser eventually pitched his slide rule into the campus lake and changed his major to English Education, his dedication to art was undiminished. Letters to his fiancée, some written while he was working summers as a sign painter, are rich in reports of his painting. Interestingly, he notes in a letter dated 19 June 1960 a Romantic inclination and a move toward surrealism in his painting, foreshadowing the shift he would later make in his poetry.

After receiving his degree and teaching high school English for a year in Madrid, Iowa, Kooser was adrift. He knew he did not want to teach, but he wasn’t sure he knew what he wanted to do (Tawney 42). He returned to sign painting for the summer while he mulled over an offer of a graduate readership by the University of Nebraska that would allow him to study with the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, Karl Shapiro, who had come to Nebraska several years earlier to take over editorship of the literary magazine, *Prairie Schooner*. As autumn approached, his choice became clear (“Karl Shapiro in the Early Sixties” 30).

Once settled in Lincoln, Nebraska, Kooser devoted a large portion of his time to drawing, painting, and photography. Although enrolled in the English department, visual artists, including abstract expressionist Stuart Hitch, studying for an MFA, and future underground cartoonist S. Clay Wilson, were among his closest friends. Several years later he met landscape painters Keith Jacobshagen and

Harry Orlyk, who arrived at the University to teach and study respectively. The Sheldon Museum of Art, dedicated in the spring of his arrival, offered Kooser access to one of the nation's top collections of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American Art for a museum of its size. Among the painters represented was Edward Hopper, whose *Room in New York* (1932) would become a touchstone for Kooser (Kooser, Ted. Personal interview. 28 June 2006). The Ashcan Eight, a group that included Hopper's teacher, Robert Henri, whose Nebraska ties are well known, was featured in the Sheldon collection and favored by Kooser.

Although he lost his graduate readership after one year, Kooser's relationship with Shapiro continued. On weekends, Kooser writes that they "often took long drives through the country in my deeply-mortgaged new convertible, taking the summer sun and drinking beer in the country bars" in the hills that would become known as the Bohemian Alps ("Karl Shapiro in the Early Sixties" 32). While he photographed the countryside, its abandoned homesteads and wide fields, he listened to stories and cadences of the men and women he met along the way. Kooser finished his degree at night and began teaching evening classes in poetry at the University. By then, he reflects, he began to realize that "I could find my own Grecian urns in the second-hand stores and old sheds on abandoned farms" (Kooser, Ted. Message to the author. 14 June 2008. E-mail).

While working in the insurance industry and writing poetry, Kooser's work as a graphic artist and editor flourished. In 1967, he founded Windflower Press and began publishing the *Salt Creek Reader*. Following Kooser's first full-length poetry collection, *Official Entry Blank* (1969), Windflower issued *Grass County*, a slim chapbook of his pen-and-ink drawings and poems, in which he uses both written word and visual image to capture the language and isolation of the Great Plains.

The influences of a California-based poet, Leonard Nathan, and a Seward County artist, Reinhold P. Marxhausen, are evident throughout *A Local Habitation & a Name* (1974), Kooser's second collection, as they are in all of his work that follows. He has written about his relationship with Nathan, but not so much is known about Marxhausen, an art professor at Concordia College (now University), who was invited into the insurance company headquarters where Kooser worked to photograph objects he found interesting—ashtrays, pencils in a cup, rubber bands and paper clips. Selected prints

were hung in the lobby and throughout the building, allowing Kooser to reflect during his work day on “all the abstractions of their world . . . in a new way” (“Out of the Ordinary” 2-5).

In 1978, following *Not Coming to Be Barked At* (1976), Kooser published a 108-page graphic novel, *Hatcher*. Assembled from nineteenth-century German lithographs salvaged from the local Goodwill, *Hatcher* recounts the story of an archetypal Don Juan, “poet, raconteur, bon vivant” (104) known by his last—or first—name, as seen through the eyes of his lovers, husbands of lovers, priests, and townspeople. *Hatcher*, like Byron’s hero, “was forever a fool for love,” (5), and his women continue to love him and marvel at his sexual prowess long after he has gone.

The poet’s sharp images and his relationship with nature became clear in his poetry in 1980 with the publication of *Sure Signs: New and Selected Poems*. *The Windflower Home Almanac of Poetry* appeared the same year. The anthology, edited by the poet, brings together 181 short poems from a variety of writers, well known and unknown, and is replete with original pen and ink drawings, clip art, advertisements from early Farmers’ Almanacs, and good humor. Kooser’s almanac contains all one needs to get through any year of planting and pestilence, heartbreak and meal plans, a bargain at \$2.00 a copy. *One World at a Time* (1985), *The Blizzard Voices* (1986), and *Weather Central* (1994) followed.

The ravages of time and the richness of life, always among Kooser’s major preoccupations, took center stage in his work following his diagnosis of throat cancer in 1998. Chiaroscuro emerged as one of his primary poetic devices in the trio of bittersweet books that followed on the heels of his illness. In different ways, all three call attention to the interrelationship of Kooser’s poetry and his knowledge and practice of the visual arts.

Winter Morning Walks: One Hundred Postcards to Jim Harrison (2000), which traces his treatment and recovery, relies on chiaroscuro for its cover—Kooser’s painting, *Old Snow*—text, and internal graphics, which heighten the passage of time and convey the rhythm of his walk. The original poems affixed to the face of postcards and mailed to the poet’s long-time friend, writer Jim Harrison, are works of visual art in their own right.

As we have seen, *Local Wonders* (2004) calls attention to Kooser’s understanding of the creative act on its first pages (“opening a little color against the darkness”). Later in the memoir, he elab-

orates on the essential relationship between his own literary use of light and dark and the visual chiaroscuro employed in George C. Ault's painting, *August Night at Russell's Corners* (1948), in the permanent collection of the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha. The painting, he writes, "seems to have the simple premise: old buildings that in daylight would be so familiar that a person living in Russell's Corners wouldn't even notice them become exotic and mysterious in the light from a commonplace bulb" (94). Ault, Kooser continues,

made four paintings of this same midnight crossroads, each from a slightly different angle . . . But their effect upon me is identical. I can feel my will joining with that of the feeble light in its struggle to push back the darkness, darkness that has already begun to affect and alter the familiar, making it strange and exciting. I wrote:

*If you can awaken
inside the familiar
you need never
leave home.*

Local Wonders (94)

For *Delights & Shadows* (2004), where the technique became central, Kooser chose *August Night at Russell's Corners* as its cover image. The painting amplifies the title while making explicit the correspondence Kooser sees between literary and visual chiaroscuro. In an interview several years later, he clarifies his intent and describes how paints are layered in order to create an illusion of depth, reminding his readers of his long-time expertise as a painter (Kooser, Ted. Personal interview. 28 June 2006). As though to underscore the continuing importance of chiaroscuro to his poetry all along, Kooser chose Catherine Drabkin's *Red Lamp with Flowers* for the cover of his selected poems, *Flying at Night: Poems 1965-1985* (2005).

For the epigraph of *Delights & Shadows*, an example of literary chiaroscuro in its own right, Kooser borrows a line from Emily Dickinson's 1862 letter to Thomas Higginson: "The sailor cannot see the North but knows the Needle can." He reminds readers at the outset that human mortality, or death—the unseen North—both haunts and informs our lives. The poems that follow suggest, often by contrast, that human awareness of death and death itself is complemented by human memory and imagination by which we revisit the

past and transform everyday life into art—for our own pleasure and appreciation as well as for others.

Each of the collection's four sections employs chiaroscuro in ways that are both painterly and literary, capturing the light of existence as it shines from the inevitable darkness beyond. Life is light, filled with a cacophony of movement and sound; death is dark, silent, and still. In the book's first section, *Walking on Tiptoe*, old men, middle-aged women, children, a college student, a biker, restaurant patrons, shoppers, mourners, a woman navigating a wheel chair, and an ice skater travel at various velocities and in various ways; their stories flicker before us as they head toward a destination always certain, if not always seen. Although neither memory nor imagination can stop time, both allow, as section two, *The China Painters*, demonstrates, a means by which we may preserve the past; their visual artifacts are (de)lights that shine from the darkness. Kooser's use of chiaroscuro continues in section three, *Bank Fishing for Bluegills*, where his interest in and practice of drawing and painting become explicit. These poems include a still life, a series inspired by Winslow Homer, artifacts from natural history and county museums, and everyday objects. Each serves as a sort of historical document by which we can glimpse and appreciate the past. As *Delights & Shadows* draws to a close, the final thirteen poems, in section four, personalize themes raised in the initial thirteen; here, Kooser addresses the inevitability of his own death and his place within the natural world.

Examples from each of the sections will suggest the various, subtle, and fresh ways Kooser uses literary chiaroscuro. "Walking on Tiptoe," the title poem of section one, juxtaposes the human species with other animals with an eye to understanding what may have been lost with our evolutionary gain and how that loss might, at least momentarily, be transcended through the imagination. "Walking on Tiptoe" is an example of what I call the Kooser sonnet, typically ten to twenty lines that generally follow the traditional form's structure; literary chiaroscuro is essential to the sonnet's organization. Like the conventional sonnet, the Kooser sonnet, in the words of his mentor at the University of Nebraska, "is large enough to allow the poet to set forth a problem and then go on to solve it (or find it insoluble); to present a situation and then interpret it; to move in one direction and then to reverse that direction completely" (Shapiro and Beum 135).

Kooser uses sentences rather than lines to signal the cognitive shift found within conventional sonnets. The first six lines of the

poem are composed of two related sentences: the first sentence, three and a half lines long, offer the observation that a long time ago human beings began walking flat-footed while other animals still ran on tiptoes and “we thrill to their speed.” The second sentence, two and a half lines, extends the recognition of the animals’ abilities with the example of the mouse, graceful while bearing a great weight, a nugget of dog food. The following six sentences outline the human predicament: responsibility has its price.

The sonnet’s turn or volta comes with line 13, signaled by the word “But,” which begins the sentence as well as the line. The poet moves to the lightness (note the pun), even joy, which the human imagination can provide. *S* sounds, which have scurried throughout the poem, accentuate the reader’s imagined speed: “up on our toes, / stealing past doors where others are sleeping,” when “we” are “suddenly able to see in the dark.” Despite loss of speed and grace, we can “sometimes” imagine the stealth and quickness. Imagination and playfulness, antidotes to our burden of knowledge, allow us to experience the mystery and joy of life. Double anapests emphasize the gesture. And of course, “Long ago” refers to literal childhood, when “we” ran on tiptoes, *and* to our origin as *homo sapiens*.

The poem may also allude to biblical chiaroscuro, the organizing principle of the Judeo-Christian creation story: from darkness light was made. Genesis and the balance of the Old Testament pronounce human beings, fashioned in the image and likeness of God, stewards of His creation and, therefore, as Kooser writes, “burdened with responsibility.” In this capacity, “disciplinary actions” have “fallen to us.” Ironically, as a result, our own feet have become “bound stiff in the skins of the conquered.”

The poem’s seventeen lines vary in length and, in what can be viewed as employing aural chiaroscuro, rely on sound and meter to support meaning. Long open *os* and liquid *ls* pull the reader into the poem like a story at bedtime, while the third and fourth lines quicken, underscoring our thrill at the speed of the animals as they flee. The plosives — *b, d, d, p, b, t* — of line eight accentuate the task that human beings have shouldered. As line eight continues and on through line ten, the meter slows; “responsibility,” “disciplinary,” and “punishments” are the longest words found in the poem. The double-*l* sound reverberates three additional times during the darkest movement of the poem, lines 11-13, visually reminding the reader of our delight, our “thrill,” at their speed.

An *ars poetica*, “Walking on Tiptoe” is another kind of creation story, where, “in the early hours,” a poet catches sight of the extraordinary, sparking the poem into being. Light dawns; the poem begins to form. Kooser is describing what American poet William Carlos Williams called “the radiant gist.” As Williams wrote, “We catch a glimpse of something, from time to time which shows us that a presence has just brushed past us, some rare thing—just when the smiling little Italian woman has left us. For a moment we are dazed” (360).

In the 18-line, one-sentence “The China Painters,” the title poem of section two, Kooser preserves family artisans as, in some ways at least, their art can be seen as preserving them. The opening ten-syllable line introduces the painters, who “have set aside their black tin boxes.” They leave behind well-used tools of their art: the “scratched and dented, spattered” paint box and the “dried-up rolled-up tubes” that in this case once belonged to Kooser’s wife’s grandmother. The colors dazzle again as the poet names them: “alizarin crimson, chrome green, / zinc white, and ultramarine.” Vials of gold powder are half full; death frequently comes before our work is finished.

Kooser’s attention to the details of art making continues: “stubs of wax pencils; / frayed brushes with tooth-bitten shafts” that were used to reproduce “clouds of loose, lush roses, / narcissus, pansies, columbine” on china is “spread like a garden / on the white lace Sunday cloth.” Then, in one of Kooser’s seamless reversals, the painters seem to disappear into the very blooms they have painted. The final two lines extend the life-as-garden metaphor with a simile; the souls of the painters are imagined as bees, their world as “nothing but flowers.” As the bees produce and store honey, painters distill and preserve the life and beauty they see around them.

As Kooser has observed, “Modernism was going in another direction” and the Ashcan Group was “still trying to do something with proletarian things” (Kooser, Ted. Personal interview. 28 June 2006). The poet’s affinity with these painters—his emphasis is on everyman/woman living everyday lives and making art from and for it—is clear. His aesthetics repeatedly echo Henri’s *The Art Spirit*, the painting’s writings drawn from a variety of sources—notes to students, articles, and letters. Greatly influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson, as well as Walt Whitman (a favorite of Shapiro’s), Henri has much to offer writers. “I’ve been marking passages that would be useful to student writers,” Kooser says. “There’s a lot to learn from that whole group of people [the Ashcan School],” he continues,

including John Sloane's diaries of that period (Kooser, Ted. Personal interview. 28 June 2006).

That art must deal directly with life is a theme that resonates throughout Henri's *The Art Spirit*, and it is a tenet Kooser has taken for his own. Like Henri, Kooser makes no distinction between high and low art as he continues his theme of preservation of the past through the imagination. Art, like poetry, he suggests, allows glimpses of light in the darkness of the past. The power of the imagination and the force of the creative act, as Kooser suggests in "Memory," the poem that follows "The China Painters," can be likened to the natural force of the tornado.

In section three, Bank Fishing for Bluegills, Kooser's interest in and practice of drawing and painting become explicit. The title poem, which Kooser describes as having "much in common with a Homer or Sargent watercolor," is both poem and still life. "Good watercolor paintings," Kooser says, "look like the artist dashed them off, although it takes a tremendous effort to do that." He also sees similarities between the processes of painting and poetry, both built from an image. "The revision process is similar," he continues, the

standing back, looking at it, giving it a little time, then going back in, correcting things. . . . For the small poem of twelve or fourteen lines, there might be thirty or forty versions by the time I'm done. My revisions are toward a kind of clarity and freedom so that—and this would be a parallel with painting—it appears the poem came off the brush like a stroke of watercolor without any effort whatsoever. (Clark and Saiser 225)

Kooser traveled to Kansas City to attend *Winslow Homer and the Critics: Forging a National Art in the 1870s*, a 2001 retrospective of drawings, oil paintings, and watercolors, held at The Nelson-Adkins Museum of Art. Homer, like Henri, also worked as an illustrator and sometimes used his experience documenting the Civil War for *Harper's Weekly* as the basis for oil paintings. Many depict the camp life, illuminating "the physical and psychological plight of ordinary soldiers" ("Winslow Homer").

"Four Civil War Paintings by Winslow Homer" begins with an epigraph that says at least as much about Kooser's view of the poet and of poetry as it does about the criteria for evaluating Civil War art. The passage is taken from the 31 May 1865 edition of *The Evening Post* [New York]: ". . . if the painter shows that he observes more than

he reflects, we will forget the limitation and take his work as we take nature, which, if it does not think, is yet the cause of thought in us” (qtd. in *Delights & Shadows* 46).

“Sharpshooter” makes the comparison between the image, a Union sniper perched in a tree with his rifle, and the poet: “Some part of art is the art / of waiting—the chord / behind the tight fence / of a musical staff / the sonnet shut in a book. “This,” he continues, “is a painting of waiting . . .” Kooser describes the figure carefully, developing the analogy; the patient shooter like the poet sits quietly, “. . . one open eye, / like a star you might see / in broad daylight, / if you thought to look up” (46-7). This may also be another allusion to Williams’s “radiant gist.” The poem also recalls Henri’s often-quoted dictum: “It is harder to see than it is to express. The whole value of art rests in the artist’s ability to see well into what is before him” (169).

Homer frequently depicted the daily life of the troops. “The Bright Side,” as well as the painting, known also as *Light and Shade*, upon which it is based, relies on chiaroscuro for its full effect, subtly calling attention to race within the Union war effort. “Though they lie in the sun,” up against an army tent in the Homer painting, the light “seems to soak / Into their sweaty clothes / And their skin, making them / even more black than they were” (48). African American soldiers, rarely allowed to serve in combat roles, provided food and munitions to the front line, essential to the Union win. Kooser underscores their role by an accounting in the poem’s final lines.

The three Confederate “Prisoners from the Front,” distinctive in dress and attitude, stand in line. Descriptions, a study in contrasts, are succinct. The youngest, who wears “butternut regalia, is handsome”; the cap on his red hair is “cocked,” while the old man wears a tattered coat and “slumps like the very meaning / of surrender, but his jaw is set.” Art, Kooser suggests, allows us to revisit a past war in a personal way. The eyes of the old soldier are “like flashes / from distant cannon (we have waited / a hundred and forty years / to hear those reports).” The third soldier, “hot and young and ornery,” is posturing in his “floppy hat, brim up,” his “military coat unbuttoned / hands stuffed in his pockets, / his mouth poised to spit.” Against the group, Homer has juxtaposed the Union general, dressed in his “neat blue uniform, the cavalry / Saber and fancy black hat” (49). The observer, painter and poet alike, has the power, as does the young captive with “mouth poised to spit,” to affect the general’s mood, pro-

viding painting and poem with a tension that seems to issue from the event itself.

In contrast to "Sharpshooter," the final poem of the series, "The Veteran in a New Field," depicts a soldier recently returned from war. He has discarded his Union army jacket, dark and nearly invisible at field's (and painting's) edge and has taken up a scythe to return to his life as a farmer. Juxtaposed against the literal and metaphorical dark, the golden sunlit wheat field lies before him. Although the war is over, the veteran will carry a new awareness into his life as a civilian: "Where he has passed, the hot stalks spread / in streaks, like a shell exploding, but that is / behind him. With stiff, bony shoulders / he mows his way into the colors of summer" (50).

Throughout this section, images act as artifacts, juxtaposing present and past. In "Pegboard" the outline of tools on the pegboard, "like the outlines of hands on the walls / of ancient caves," preserves the past while illustrating what has been lost (52). Nickel vases on the four corners of the horse-drawn hearse on display at the Seward County Museum at Goehner, Nebraska, described in "At the County Museum"; the fishing equipment on the yard sale tables in "Casting Reels"; the flesh-and-blood horse, with its "hot shudder of satin" (56) in "Horse," which carries us back to the nineteenth century when the horses pulled ploughs and taxied city dwellers; and the displays of past life at Morrill Hall described in "In the Hall of Bones," remind us that life continues even as we meditate on what has gone before.

The thirteen poems of section four in many ways mirror and further personalize the collection's initial thirteen. As *Delights & Shadows* ends, Kooser addresses the inevitability of his own death, his turn toward the world's beauty for sustenance and delight, and the meaning art holds for him in grasping both light and life. In "That Was I," the "I," although it appears to be the poet as he travels to small towns located in his Bohemian Alps, is also an archetypal "I." Kooser suggests this level of meaning in part by the uncommon syntax of the refrain (also called a "burden"), and in part by a distancing, more impersonal description of the presenting figure in each of the three stanzas: "that older man," "the round-shouldered man," and the man "down on one knee" (71-2).

Each stanza moves the attention of the reader geographically toward Kooser's home place, where the final poem of the collection is set. Stanza one is located in the small town of Thayer, population 70, York County, about 28 miles west of his residence. Here it is

autumn, and the reader finds “the older man . . . sitting / in a confetti of yellow light and falling leaves” in the horseshoe court overgrown with grass, “like old graves.” Then the stanza turns: “but I was not letting / my thoughts go there” (71). Instead the poet is “looking / with hope to a grapevine draped over / a fence in a neighboring yard, and knowing / that I could hold on” (71), suggesting attachment, even communion, with the earth and others.

In *Rising City*, a town of about four hundred residents located in Butler County, 41 miles north and west of Garland, the setting of stanza two, the reader comes upon “the round-shouldered man” walking the Main Street of the abandoned Mini Golf range. The world he finds before him is “abbreviated”—the “plywood store, / the poor red school, the faded barn”—it is not far-fetched to conjecture, like the abbreviated versions of the classics, Cliff Notes, originally developed by Rising City native Clifford Hillegass. Not even in the “little events” of the miniature Mini Golf world “could a person control his life.” The metaphor with which he compares human loss of control, “the snap / of a grasshopper’s wing against a paper cup” (71) is haunting.

Staplehurst Cemetery, just outside of the town it serves, is about 17 miles west of Garland, closer than that as the crow flies, in the heart of Seward County. It is evening and Kooser/Everyman is “down on one knee.” The poet imagines that the reader sees him as “some lonely old man” trying to make out a name on a stone. Instead, he is the poet kneeling in awe of the “perfect web” of a “handsome black and yellow spider,” another miniature world.¹ The spider, small though it may be, is “pumping its legs,” trying to shake the poet’s footing “as if I were a gift, an enormous moth / that it could snare and eat” (72). This attempt to reverse the food chain is both absurd and comforting as it places the human being within the context of nature. The spider, long associated with the creative act, reminds the reader of the three fates, the alteration ladies of Greek mythology, whose task it is to spin, measure, and cut the thread of life.²

The balance of mortality and hope, death and light, runs throughout the section. Lyrics are predominately softer; birds, long held symbols of the spirit, flit through the pages. The “Screech Owl,” “a bird no bigger than a heart,” “calls out” in aural chiaroscuro, “again and again” from the “center of darkness” (73). “The Early Bird,” composed of one sentence divided into 13 lines, six couplets and a final singlet, hauls up each dawn with “its sweet-sour / wooden-pully

notes”(75) so that, like water from a well, we, in the last line, may drink. This early bird is a song bird, much like the poet at his desk at five singing his own song. But the preoccupation of one's later years continues, making its way into the poet's vision of the world, natural and manufactured. With age comes the paring down of concerns, as in “A Spiral Notebook.” Even so, awe remains. Memories of loved ones visit by day and by night in dreams, as in “Starlight,” Kooser's two-line poem where, “All night, this soft rain from the distant past” (76) wakes him.

Delights & Shadows, which opens with the dawn of the human race, ends with one man's twilight in the seven-line poem, “A Happy Birthday.” The poet, we learn, has been reading by an open window as twilight descends. “I could easily have switched on a lamp,” he says, “but I wanted to ride this day down into the night, / to sit alone and smooth the unreadable page / with the pale gray ghost of my hand” (84). As the poet moves into darkness, he does not, as Dylan Thomas urged, “rage, rage, against the dying of the light.” Kooser's poem is closer to Czeslaw Milosz's nine-line “Gift,” which captures a moment of transformation and light.

As Robert Frost wrote, “nothing gold can stay.” Human consciousness shines its attention on things we may find in the darkness, and art—Kooser's and Lentil's—brings them into our lives and into community life for all to see. In the end, each of us will retreat into ultimate darkness. As day ends, the “pale gray ghost” of the poet's hand—the same hand that held the pen through which memories funnel into art—is still visible, chiaroscuro, lighting the darkness and speaking to the future.

Kooser continues to live in the Bohemian Alps in a house very much like Velma Rayness's, painting, in his Mercury Topaz, or in a corncrib he has converted into an art studio, reading and writing in a shed that looks out over his pond “shining in the sun” (*Local Wonders* xi). Once a week, he still meets with a group of painters for a lunch of conversation and camaraderie. “This is the life, I have chosen,” he concludes in *Local Wonders*, “one in which I can pass by on the outside, looking back in—into a world in static diorama, the world that Edward Hopper seemed to see” (96).

NOTES

¹The colors are reminiscent of Cliff Notes covers.

²“That Was I” can also be read as an allusion, if not a tribute, to poet James Wright, whose work Kooser followed closely. Wright’s posthumously published collection, *This Journey*, opens with the poet entering the Temple of Diana, asking for just one vine leaf, recalling Kooser’s engagement with the grapevine in the first stanza. Wright, who was dying of cancer, was on a trip to his beloved Italy. In the poem, “The Journey,” Wright finds what he was looking for, perhaps what the “old man” in “That Was I” and the reader have been seeking, a way to avoid thinking of death while all the while acknowledging it. Wright learns his lesson from a spider outside Anghiari, a medieval city in Tuscany.

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THE SPY IN THE LOBBY: IMPERSONAL OBSERVATION IN THE WORK OF TED KOOSER

WES MANTOOTH

In *The Poetry Home Repair Manual: Practical Advice for Beginning Poets* (2005), Ted Kooser observes that American poetry has become dominated by “I” poems that dwell heavily on the writer’s subjective, intimate experience and may fail to show readers why they should care about this viewpoint. Using a creative analogy, Kooser suggests a different poetic mindset:

You’ve undoubtedly seen movies in which a nameless spy, or a private detective, sits in a hotel lobby and peers over the top of a newspaper at someone across the room, mentally taking notes. The spy’s job is (1) to record what he sees, (2) to avoid calling attention to himself, (3) to draw conclusions from his observations, and (4) to pass all this along to the person who hired him. (97)

What Kooser is suggesting here is that writers find ways to call less attention to themselves than to the people or things they are observing. Not surprisingly, this “spy in the lobby” metaphor can illuminate a range of Kooser’s writing about people he has presumably seen or met but does not know. Numerous Kooser poems may be described using Kooser’s own term “the writing of impersonal observation” (*Poetry Home Repair Manual* 97), and a close look at particularly compelling examples of Kooser’s writing in this vein yields insights into the way Kooser conceives the relationship between the observed, the observer, and the all-important reader—the one who, in a sense, has hired the poet as a spy.

Various techniques can provide readers with a sense of the poet’s presence as an observer, but the appearance of the pronoun “I” is a particularly obvious marker of viewpoint. Even if a poem ostensibly focuses on another person, repeated use of “I” will divert some atten-

tion back to the observer. Within Kooser's poems of impersonal observation, "I" is used judiciously and strategically, often counterbalanced with the pronoun "you." To illustrate his "spy in the lobby" concept, Kooser analyzes David Ray's "At the Train Station in Pamplona," noting the absence of "I" and describing the poem as "an antithesis to the more popular 'I' poem that has been the popular model for half a century" (*Poetry Home Repair Manual* 97). Kooser's own "Tattoo" from *Delights & Shadows* is one rich poem of impersonal observation in which "I" also happens to be absent. This 15-line, two-sentence poem portrays an old man seen at a yard sale and, as the poem's title suggests, focuses on a faded tattoo conspicuously displayed on his shoulder. Though "Tattoo" doesn't explicitly draw attention to an observer, its subjective details evoke a distinct individual behind the words:

What once was meant to be a statement -
 a dripping dagger held in the fist
 of a shuddering heart—is now just a bruise
 on a bony old shoulder, the spot
 where vanity once punched him hard
 and the ache lingered on.

In the line that follows, the poem's single use of "you" moves readers from imagining only the poet looking at the man to feeling themselves as participants in the viewing and speculating:

. . . He looks like
 someone you had to reckon with,
 strong as a stallion, fast and ornery, (6)

Kooser also gives readers a socially acceptable context for staring at the tattoo, since even "on this chilly morning" the man has chosen to present himself with "the sleeves of his tight black T-shirt / rolled up to show us who he was" (6).

In this poem about a stranger, the tattoo is a compelling aspect of the observation both because it links the past and present—the "was" and the "is"—and because it brings an otherwise inaccessible trace of the wearer's inner psyche to the skin's surface. Through imagination, Kooser briefly makes vibrant what "is now just a bruise / on a bony old shoulder" and reclaims a glimpse of the earlier man, "strong as a stallion, fast and ornery." Without the tattoo, Kooser would lack crucial support for his final assessment:

he is only another old man, picking up
 broken tools and putting them back,
 his heart gone soft and blue with stories (6).

Not only has the tattooed heart gotten visibly loose and blurred with age, but also this man's inner heart—his emotional outlook on life—has presumably changed through accumulated experience. The adjectives that describe this older heart—"soft and blue"—suggest a new gentleness laced with melancholy but leave the precise emotional mix intentionally vague.

Though it creates satisfying meaning from sparse concrete evidence, "Tattoo" demonstrates limits in what an observer can speculate about the life of such a total stranger. Although the tattoo itself "once *was meant* to be a statement" (emphasis added), a casual observer cannot know what it was meant to state. Indeed, an image of "a dripping dagger held in the fist / of a shuddering heart" conveys an ambiguous message. Even if this man once wanted to warn others that loving him was risky, the unnatural image of a "shuddering heart" clenching a dagger suggests injury to his own heart as well. Kooser hints at such self-injury in his assessment that this tattoo marks "the spot / where vanity once punched him hard / and the ache lingered on." But what is really going through this man's mind as he wanders through a yard sale, "picking up broken tools and putting them back"? Although it's unlikely that the man himself sees any ironic link between his deteriorated tattoo—"a dripping dagger"—and the "broken tools" at the yard sale, we cannot know what this man might actually say about his life. Thus, even though Kooser himself refrains from speculating too deeply on what he cannot know, readers are free to invent possible stories from limited visible signs.

It bears noting as well that this poem is set at a yard sale. Somewhat like the way tattoos bring to the surface potential clues about the inner lives of the people who wear them, yard sales invite people to peruse items normally kept private inside the home. Kooser, in fact, has professed a great attraction to yard sales for this very reason. In his literary prose book, *Local Wonders: Seasons in the Bohemian Alps*, he describes garage sales as a sort of theater with sale items serving as the main props and with sellers and browsing customers alike as actors: "just as when watching a play, you have the opportunity to poke around in other people's business while discreetly standing off at a safe distance" (33). Further, there is rich potential in

speculating on the history of items for sale and the motives of the people who cast off or buy up used merchandise. Items may be sold for many reasons—they are no longer needed or valued, the owner has died, the seller needs money—but buyers typically can only speculate on the stories embodied in things up for sale. Kooser’s poem “Casting Reels” from *Delights & Shadows*, for instance, imagines the men who owned the fishing reels “you find . . . at flea markets / and yard sales . . .” These reels are “spooled with the fraying line / of long stories snarled into / silence . . .” (55). In “Tattoo,” readers may speculate that the man being observed is himself observing at the sale, imagining stories in the broken tools.

In addition to attending garage sales, Kooser finds another compelling way to speculate on people even further removed from his life. Poems like “Abandoned Farmhouse,” “Pasture Trees,” and “The Lost Forge” observe places that people formerly occupied but have abandoned. These poems work not with glimpses of actual strangers but with the clues they have left behind. The very fact that the human subjects are absent allows the poet freedom to “poke around,” reconstructing absent lives from fading clues.

Poems about abandoned human environments place an observer at a considerable distance from imagined times and circumstances. Other poems, however, bring the observer and observed close together in time and shared experience. The poem “At the Cancer Clinic” from *Delights & Shadows* is one strong example of such closeness. As he focuses on one particular “sick woman” who moves slowly and with difficulty toward a waiting nurse, the poet can be imagined sitting in a cancer clinic’s waiting room, presumably before his own appointment. Compassion rather than mere curiosity seems to motivate the poet’s desire to decode the scene as he describes the “two young women *I take to be* her sisters” and as he speculates that a nurse holding open a door to an examining room “. . . *must seem to be* / a great distance . . .” away (emphasis added). Although all impressions plausibly come from a single observer, they are sequenced to give readers the sensation of moving toward collective insight. In one description near the poem’s end, readers may briefly sense the patient’s perspective:

The sick woman peers from under her funny knit cap
to watch each foot swing scuffing forward
and take its turn under her weight.

In the poem's last sentence, the point of view moves outward again:

. . . Grace
fills the clean mold of this moment
and all the shuffling magazines grow still. (7)

Through this statement, we become aware of other waiting room observers—all likely touched directly or indirectly by cancer—their reactions blending with Kooser's own to affirm this scene of "grace."

In an interview with poet Grace Cavalieri, Kooser and Cavalieri both comment on "At the Cancer Clinic," shedding light on the civic aspirations that underlie his process of gathering impressions, uncover as it were, and then presenting deeper conclusions in poetry:

TK: That poem ["At the Cancer Clinic"], I showed to my doctor, and he made a copy of it and had it framed for the nurse's station at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, and I felt, oh boy, I've written something that someone is getting some use out of. He had me do a reading to the staff of a medical center once, which was a very short reading, but at a big meeting. They had all the staff there.

GC: I call you the Poet of Affirmation. And I think that, that is what the doctor wanted to have happen. I mean, as much good will as you can bring in, that people can understand. I think that's why you're being applauded. Because we've waited a very long time to have something that belonged to everyone.

TK: Thank you. (Kooser, Ted. Interview with Grace Cavalieri. 2005)

In *The Poetry Home Repair Manual*, Kooser also shows his high regard for poetry that serves a communal use. Under the heading "Being of Service," he quotes poet Seamus Heaney: "The aim of the poet and the poetry is finally *to be of service*, to ply the effort of the individual work into the larger work of the community as a whole" (Kooser's emphasis 6). "That's good enough," Kooser comments, "to cut out and pin up over your typewriter" (6). In this light, it is significant that "At the Cancer Clinic" includes a moment of public validation and that this poem has received actual public validation in the same hospital setting that inspired it. This poem demonstrates careful work to present another person's private struggles appropriately. As Kooser states in *The Poetry Home Repair Manual*, "It's inappropri-

priate to take as your subject somebody's misfortune and make of it a literary event" (145). Although "At the Cancer Clinic" certainly deals with somebody's misfortune, it emphasizes the patient's perseverance and the people who are supporting her.

Regarding poems drawn from more unequivocally tragic experiences involving other people, Kooser offers the specific aesthetic and technical advice that "metaphor can seem condescending or inappropriate" in a poem about human tragedy (145). Kooser's *The Blizzard Voices* (1986) follows this advice as it attempts to recreate the voices of men and women who survived an epic Midwestern blizzard of 1888 and in many cases lost family members, limbs, or livestock. This entire volume is striking for its plain speech and absence of figurative language. One woman's voice recalls that "When [the storm] came it felt as if / an enormous fist had struck / the house" (n.pag.), but this is virtually the only figurative treatment of the storm in the entire volume of poems. The real-world details are enough to make the poems memorable and even haunting. As Kooser observes in *The Poetry Home Repair Manual*, "Sometimes, when the narrative of an experience is strong enough, and unique enough, it doesn't require much more than a carefully written, straight-ahead, unadorned delivery" (144-5). Lack of artifice in *The Blizzard Voices* also enhances the desired illusion that these poems are real voices since a person who survived a harrowing storm wouldn't likely ornament the experience.

Of course, since nearly a century had passed since the blizzard, these poems are not based on Kooser's observations of actual survivors. Although he read numerous real accounts and recalled hearing stories during his childhood, he tells readers in his introduction that "these poems are wholly mine, trimmed and shaped and imagined by me." Indeed, the very fact that so much time had passed since the misfortunes likely makes this blizzard more acceptable as a literary subject. Like "At the Cancer Clinic," these poems have received affirmation in a public setting, and Kooser's comments in the book's introduction on this rewarding experience once again highlight a community-oriented mission behind bringing private or lost stories to light:

This book was performed as a play by the Lincoln, Nebraska, Community Playhouse in the late 1980s, and what struck me most was not the pleasure of seeing my work come to life but what occurred in the theater lobby afterward. Somehow my poems and a

handful of talented actors had set memory free It was one of the most marvelous evenings of my life, for what I'd written was being put to service, and a community was awakening to a history they'd misplaced I have rarely been more deeply honored. (n. pag)

The creative possibilities Kooser finds in impersonal observation can be better understood by considering that Kooser also writes extensively and movingly about a contrasting category of people—not strangers, but identifiable acquaintances and family members in and around the rural Nebraska community where he lives. Writing about strangers and writing about identifiable people raise different aesthetic, formal, and even moral considerations. Writing about living people involves certain risks, particularly when the writer draws material from a small community and values genuine connectedness with this same community. As Kooser acknowledges in *Local Wonders*, a prose work in which Kooser portrays his rural Nebraska home and the surrounding natural and human culture, “Nobody in Nebraska is all that much at ease with a writer in the neighborhood” (28). At the outset of this same book, Kooser uses a traditional Bohemian aphorism to show that he cares how his neighbors view him as much as his neighbors presumably care how he views them: “The Bohemians say, ‘he who wants to know himself should offend two or three of his neighbors.’ I hope I have not done so” (xvii).

If “the spy in the lobby” symbolizes the poet as impersonal observer, a corresponding image—“the son in the home”—might describe the poet writing as a *personal* observer with strong family and community bonds. Kooser evokes this feeling of attachment well in “Pearl” from *Delights & Shadows*, a poem which describes a time he went “. . . to tell our cousin, Pearl, / that her childhood playmate, Vera, my mother, / had died . . .”:

. . . I called out, “Pearl,
it’s Ted. It’s Vera’s boy,” and my voice broke,
for it came to me, nearly sixty, I was still
my mother’s boy, that boy for the rest of my life (37)

Creating literary writing about people with whom one is acquainted or even intimately connected—neighbors, friends, family—poses distinct challenges. In his poems of impersonal observation, Kooser often draws meaning from a few carefully chosen details, those an attentive observer might plausibly note in a brief encounter with a stranger. Minimal detail allows controlled develop-

ment of symbols and the understanding that much of the subject's reality must be imagined by the poet and reader. When trying to write about someone familiar and close, writers may feel daunted by the very fact that they have so many details to choose from. If poets aspire to create concise, unified poems about people they know well, they will most likely present only a small slice of their actual knowledge and feelings. Paradoxically, the reshaping of a familiar person through carefully chosen words may also reshape and limit the way this person is remembered. In *Local Wonders*, Kooser critiques the way his memory has long fixated on an image of his maternal grandmother standing at her stove frying potatoes. "Whenever I think of her," he writes, "she must rise from her daybed by the parlor window and return to that hot kitchen and stand on her swollen feet at the wood range and begin frying potatoes. This is not the afterlife that the Lutheran church taught her to expect" (119). As these comments suggest, Kooser senses that his grandmother would have chosen, if she were alive, a more varied or flattering portrayal. "When I am gone," Kooser writes, "she will be freed from this duty" (119).

In his writing about close family, Kooser frequently portrays people who are no longer alive. He may do so in part because he feels less constrained by the possibility of such people objecting to their portrayals. Tellingly, in *Local Wonders*, when Kooser describes visiting his wife's 107-year-old great aunt, he remarks that "[a]t such an advanced age, she may revise her family's history in whatever way she wishes, for she has outlived anyone who might contradict her" (119). But what about writing that refers to living family members? What if the writer's view of an identifiable living person might in some way upset that person or others close to him or her? Advice specific to writing about family may be found in *Writing Brave and Free: Encouraging Words for People Who Want to Start Writing*, a book co-authored by Kooser and Steve Cox. A chapter entitled "Writing for Friends and Relations" offers thoughts on a daunting question facing many writers: "[H]ow truthful should you be?" (61). On the one hand, the reading public generally rewards writers who show "candor" toward themselves and those close to them: "Can you think of any books or poems that have been praised for their tact? Aren't writers more likely to be praised for their candor?" (61). On the other hand, Kooser and Cox advise, "What if you consider simple human kindness? Do you want Aunt Ginny to feel bad when she reads where you called her fat? . . . What you write about your friends and relations is

also a question of tact, which has to do with good manners, which has to do with people getting along with each other” (61).

That Kooser himself seems to generally value tact over candor is suggested by the following anecdote in *Writing Brave and Free*: “Ted once wrote a funny satirical poem about some people he worked with. When he read it to a friend, the friend said, ‘Don’t be too hard on those people, Ted. You know, almost everybody is doing the best that they can.’ Ted stopped to think: does it really make sense to hurt somebody for the sake of one more stanza? Which is worth more, a person’s feelings or a few cold sentences?” The concluding thoughts of this chapter also offer a clue toward Kooser’s dominant literary stance toward the world: “Writing about your life for your own friends and relatives, the main thing is to tell the truth. And if you can’t tell the truth, either because you can’t remember the facts or you don’t wish to offend some living member of your community, well, you’ve seen the world and know a million stories. You can always just tell a different story, tell the truth about some other part of your life” (62).

If, as such comments suggest, writing about family requires adherence to the truth while protecting the feelings of any people the writing implicates, it’s easy to see one appeal of writing about strangers—a freedom to invent or omit unknown details with little worry about accountability or tact. Kooser turns repeatedly to such poetic situations, creating poems in which the speaker not only does not know his subjects but does not interact with them or draw their attention. Partly because such poems form a significant pattern within Kooser’s body of work, certain poems stand out as creative variations on this detached-observer theme. One such poem, “In the Basement of the Goodwill Store,” begins in a familiar detached mode, its first stanza describing

. . . an old man [who] stands
 trying on glasses, lifting each pair
 from the box like a glittering fish
 and holding it up to the light
 of a dirty bulb

Like the garage sales discussed earlier, this Goodwill store provides a stage where people and objects with elusive histories can interact. Like the poem “Tattoo,” this poem avoids any use of “I” but instead repeatedly uses “you” to bring readers onto the stage. In this case, the

poem does more than place readers at the scene; it also ties readers, via their attitudes and behavior, to this old man:

You've seen him somewhere before.
 He's wearing the green leisure suit
 you threw out with the garbage, and the Christmas tie you hated,
 and the ventilated wingtip shoes
 you found in your father's closet
 and wore as a joke

In the poem's final sentences, the old man catches readers in the act of observing him, and his return gaze delivers a shock of recognition—readers are not as far removed from the elderly as they might like to believe:

. . . And the glasses
 which finally fit him, through which
 he looks to see you looking back—
 two mirrors which flash and glance—
 are those through which one day
 you too will look down over the years,
 when you have grown old and thin
 and no longer particular,
 and the things you once thought
 you were rid of forever
 have taken you back in their arms.

Although this poem uses a situation relatively rare for Kooser—one in which a subject “looks to see you looking back”—the goals behind the observation are consistent with Kooser's frequent emphasis on helping people to recognize their connections with each other. Through the act of viewing—and being caught viewing—readers are prompted to identify with a person they may have first seen as essentially unlike themselves. Significantly, readers don't get to see directly into this man's eyes. As with other poems of impersonal observation, readers must guess at the inner life of the subject as they see themselves reflected back in the mirrorlike surface of his glasses and assume that he also sees them through the glasses he has chosen.

A final variation on the “spy in the lobby” pattern, Kooser's “That Was I” from *Delights & Shadows* seems like a crucial statement from a poet who has so often put impersonal observations of strangers into poetry. Described by Kooser in his interview with Grace Cavalieri as a self-portrait, this poem presents three stanzas in which an “older

man” directly addresses a “you.” Each stanza recalls a moment when the poem’s “you” saw this man in passing, each time apparently misjudging his actions and thoughts. In the first stanza, the man reports being seen sitting “on a bench at the empty horseshoe courts / in Thayer, Nebraska . . .”. He then informs the person who saw him that the superficial details of the scene are unreliable clues to his real state of mind:

I had noticed, of course,
 that the rows of sunken horseshoe pits
 with their rusty stakes, grown out over the grass,
 were like old graves, but I was not letting
 my thoughts go there. Instead I was looking
 with hope to a grapevine draped over
 a fence in a neighboring yard, and knowing
 that I could hold on. Yes, that was I. (71)

The remaining two stanzas further correct this curious observer who draws conclusions too hastily and could not begin to know the true richness of the observed stranger’s experience. This message is particularly strong in the last stanza. Here, the speaker tells of being spotted “just before dark, in a weedy cemetery / west of Staplehurst, down on one knee / as if trying to make out the name on a stone.” As the speaker then reports, the observer’s conventional conclusion based on this image is completely inaccurate:

some lonely old man, you thought, come there
 to pity himself in the reliable sadness
 of grass among graves, but that was not so.
 Instead I had found in its perfect web
 a handsome black and yellow spider
 pumping its legs to try to shake my footing
 as if I were a gift, an enormous moth
 that it could snare and eat. Yes, that was I. (72)

While a number of Kooser poems are written from the vantage point of a detached observer reporting on a stranger, this poem to some degree shifts roles. Now, the predictable deductions of the detached “spy” are contrasted with the more interesting and life-affirming realities of the speaker. Still, the poem contains a further level of irony. The speaker could not possibly verify what the detached observer thought of him—unless perhaps the two actually talked. His own assumptions about how he—an older, “round-should-

dered man” (71)—appears to others show the insecurities a person may feel when aware of being the subject of another’s gaze.

This poem’s “I” is Kooser himself, and the rich insight this speaker reveals is consistent with Kooser’s accomplished poetic voice. Still, this poem might prompt us to imagine layers of poetry hidden within more straightforward poems of impersonal observation. What, for example, would the subjects of “Tattoo,” “At the Cancer Clinic,” and “In the Basement of the Goodwill Store” say about their own experiences? Would their self-portraits align with or contradict Kooser’s poems about them? Would some readers find their self-portraits more compelling than the poems we have? Such questions, I believe, in no way undermine Kooser’s work. Rather, they emerge naturally from a careful consideration of how the enterprise of writing poems about people intersects with the more important enterprise of living among people. As Kooser observes in *The Poetry Home Repair Manual*, “Poetry is a lot more important than poets [W]hat would be wrong with a world in which *everybody* were writing poems” (emphasis in original 5).

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MISTAKING SALT FOR SUGAR: TEN KOOSER'S *VALENTINES*

ALLAN N. BENN

George Bernard Shaw wrote, “The minority is sometimes right; the majority is always wrong.”¹ In that spirit, let me start with the majority view of Kooser’s *Valentines* by describing them first as what they are not. Here is part of Amazon’s “book description” of this slender volume:

Kooser’s valentine poems encompass all the facets of the holiday: the traditional hearts and candy, the brilliance and purity of love, the quiet beauty of friendship, and the bittersweetness of longing. Some of the poems use the word valentine, others do not, but there is never any doubt as to the purpose of Kooser’s creations.

(www.amazon.com/Valentines-Ted-Kooser/dp/0803217706)

When we discuss poetry, “never any doubt” seldom gets us very far; neither does the notion of a single “purpose.” I propose that most of these poems are not valentines at all, if the purpose of valentines is to express sweetly “the traditional hearts and candy” and “the brilliance and purity of love.”

I doubt that the sexually undecided and socialist Shaw had warm feelings for valentines—a vivid example of what happens when capitalism merchandises an emotion. Around the turn of the nineteenth century, books called “Valentine Writers” started to appear. These books provided formulas and texts that men used to “compose” love notes, which they would personalize by using their own handwriting. In the middle of the nineteenth century, this pretense was generally abandoned in favor of mass-produced cards, the first of which were called “mechanical valentines.” This enterprise aimed to produce a valentine for everyone. In her hyperbolic back-cover blurb—what blurb is not hyperbolic?—Louise Erdrich writes, “If it was Ted’s

sacred mission to satisfy the hearts of women, he has succeeded. One exquisite valentine every year—the answer, at last, to what women want.” That would be fine if Kooser were in the greeting card industry. But such a statement does not do justice to either women or poetry.

In short, I reject the majority’s view of this book as a collection of valentines liberally laced with sentiment, perhaps rescued from out and out banality by flashes of the talent of a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet. These twenty-three poems are more disparate and interesting than that. Yes, a few of the poems are expressions of love, but even these have the complexity we expect in the best poetry. Moreover, others seem nothing at all like valentines, while still another group features the hard-edged humor of valentine parodies.

This discussion examines a handful of these poems, moving from romantic to mock romantic, with just enough examples to demonstrate that they are all more complex than commonly believed. Enthusiastic reviewers like Emily Nussbaum and Elizabeth Lund have noted diversity in the collection, but they do not seem to recognize much of Kooser’s subversive humor, especially in the poems that violate pretty completely our notions of valentines. In short, I am claiming that the saltier poems are even less sugary than most Kooser fans claim.

At the sweet end of this spectrum, “A Map of the World” meets our expectations of a valentine as a heartfelt expression of love. This statement of commitment from one “old heart” features no irony, humor, or sentiment:

One of the ancient maps of the world
 Is heart-shaped, carefully drawn
 And once washed with bright colors,
 though the colors have faded
 as you might expect feelings to fade
 from a fragile old heart, the brown map
 of a life. But feeling is indelible,
 and longing infinite, a starburst compass
 pointing in all the directions
 two lovers might go, a fresh breeze
 swelling their sails, the future unchartered,
 still far from the edge
 where the sea pours into the stars. (29)

The speaker's love has shaped both his "heart-shaped" world and valentine. He has crafted both "carefully," through the lens of long life. The brash "bright colors" of youthful emotion "have faded" in his "fragile old heart," reducing love, it seems, to shades of brown. But the "feeling," and perhaps the valentine rendering of it, "is [nonetheless] indelible." Though aged, this love has youthful energy that promises to expand the "map" of this relationship and the emotional force behind it. The "breeze" remains "fresh"; the compass, limitless; the "longing," "infinite." The romance remains, with the zest of "a starburst." Yes, the "edge" is a reminder of death's inevitability, but the image of "the sea pour[ing] into the stars" evokes *sexual* completion as well. This is a serious, lovely expression of enduring and vital love. Actress Debra Winger, who corresponded with Kooser, quotes this poem in her back-cover blurb. One of the many recipients of these valentines, she claims to have thought that they were written to her alone.

"Splitting an Order" is another serious look at senior citizens in love, perhaps citizens who are a bit more senior than those in "A Map of the World."

I like to watch an old man cutting a sandwich in half,
 maybe an ordinary cold roast beef on whole wheat bread,
 no pickles or onion, keeping his shaky hands steady
 by placing his forearms firm on the edge of the table
 and using both hands, the left to hold the sandwich in place,
 and the right to cut it surely, corner to corner,
 observing his progress through glasses that moments before
 he wiped with his napkin, and then to see him lift half
 onto the extra plate that he had asked the server to bring,
 and then to wait, offering the plate to his wife
 while she slowly unrolls her napkin and places her spoon,
 her knife and her fork in their proper places,
 then smooths the starched white napkin over her knees
 and meets his eyes and holds out both old hands to him. (37)

What the cold meal shared by this elderly couple lacks in spice (they pass on the youthful flavors of "pickles" and "onion"), it makes up for in harmony. The man's "shakiness" is allayed not by the simple propping of forearms against the table's edge, but by the certainty of a closely shared life in which the partners know their roles perfectly. The male provides the food and then carefully carves it. The female receives the male's "offering," and put[s] things "in their proper

places.” The “starched white napkin over her knees” signifies the end of physical passion for them, but the meeting of eyes and hands shows their perfect understanding. The “order” that they split is not the sandwich; rather, it’s the order that they impose on the world together. Unlike the sandwich, *this* order is split in the sense of being shared rather than divided. Perhaps the speaker, who declares at the start of the poem that he “like[s] to watch the couple,” wishes for a love as stable and caring as this one, which certainly deserves a valentine. The inhabitants of these poems have abandoned passion and, as Kooser says of himself, “careened beyond the romantic.”

Still other “valentines” address mature love, showing relationships in which physical intimacy has cooled. Their emotions are “dark red like the deep-running, veinous blood/of the married, returning/again and again to the steady heart”—as in “In a Light Late-Winter Wind,” for example:

In a light late-winter wind
 the oak trees are scattering valentines
 over the snow—dark red
 like the deep-running, veinous blood
 of the married, returning
 again and again to the steady heart.

This leaf is yours, friend,
 picked from the heart-shaped hoofprint
 of a deer. She stood here
 under the apple tree during the night,
 kicking up sweetness, her great eyes
 watching the sleeping house. (15)

Expressions of love between the couple resemble fallen red oak leaves caught by the “light late-winter wind” “scattering valentines over the snow.” Again, as in “Splitting an Order,” cool stability characterizes this relationship. A deer takes the role of Cupid—here, a domestic spirit more than one of romance. The Edenic apple tree evokes mortality, as the couple share the final phase of life together. The “sweetness” here is not ironic, but it only faintly resembles the clichéd hyperbole and simplicity of conventional valentines. No Hallmark formula here, partly because there is no greeting card formula that includes the realities of geriatric love.

Of course, impending death is the primary reality in this “beyond the romantic.” Some of these poems consider this topic, taboo in conventional valentines—which, after all, are intended to be cheerful reminders of how love provides fulfillment in life, not how its end brings unrelenting loss. “Screech Owl” is a very dark glimpse at a lover who seems to have lost his or her partner:

All night each reedy whinny
 from a bird no bigger than a heart
 flies out of a tall black pine
 and, in a breath, is taken away
 by the stars. Yet, with small hope
 from the center of darkness
 it calls out again and again. (35)

Like the remaining bird in Whitman's “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” the despondent lover calls endlessly to a partner who, “in a breath,” has been “taken away/ by the stars.” The deluded lover clings to “small hope” of relief, as life has become “the center of darkness,” a premonition of death.

Like death, loneliness is taboo in conventional valentines, unless the loneliness comes from the absence of the correspondent, whom the writer loves. “Home Storage Barns” is a quirky ode to those who never receive valentines:

They're easy to see from the freeway,
 backed into fences like cattle
 and showing up under the eaves
 of a house, holding a dog on a chain—

little red valentine barns in which
 scholarly spiders relax in their carrels,
 having related one thing to another,
 one year to the next, having tied all
 the loose ends. Or there are those

unsold and still empty as barrels,
 by the dozens in lumberyard lots,
 waiting for someone who's wanted
 a barn all his life that will fit
 a small place in the present,

a barn of a reasonable scale,
 yet that looks like a barn ought to look

to a person who's dreaming
 (with an X of white boards on the door
 as if making a spot for the heart). (9)

People without love are like little empty barns or underfed cattle, in groups rather than couples, shoved “against the fence” in the margins of society. Perhaps some of these sad souls have sought intellectual rather than emotional fulfillment, as they are inhabited by “scholarly spiders,” who seek relationships among “things,” rather than with a possible romantic partner. The “dog on a chain” suggests a different kind of partner, a sad substitute. The characteristic “X” on the door, signifying a kiss in valentine code, here marks the absence of any such affection. These individuals are Xed as incorrect, defective. Such poems bear only ironic resemblance to valentines. They unsentimentally consider the absence of love rather than celebrate its presence.

Other poems in the collection parody valentines, often using plenty of double entendre to cut what looks like sentimental sweetness, the source of much of the “fun” that Kooser promises in his “Author’s Notes” (viii). “A Perfect Heart,” a particularly witty example, is usually seen as one of the collection’s most saccharine pieces; however, underneath this poem’s sugary exterior is an extended salty sex joke:

To make a perfect heart you take a sheet
 of red construction paper of the type
 that’s rough as a cat’s tongue, fold it once,
 and crease it really hard, so it feels
 as if your thumb might light up like a match,

 then choose your scissors from the box. I like
 those safety scissors with the sticky blades
 and the rubber grips that pinch a little skin
 as you snip along. They make you careful,
 just as you should be, cutting out a heart
 for someone you love. Don’t worry that your curve

 won’t make a valentine; it will. Rely
 on chewing on your lip and symmetry
 to guide your hand along with special art.
 And there it is at last: a heart, a heart!

In the tradition of Dickinson’s “A narrow fellow in the grass,” this seemingly innocent poem should be rated X. Seeming to be a mini-

manual for cutting out a heart to make a valentine—indeed, that *would* be saccharine—the poem's lesson is really about making the beast with two backs, which, in silhouette, can resemble a heart.

The poem is quite graphic. The opening stanza represents foreplay, on a red sheet no less, with provocative references to “tongue” and “crease,” as well as a double phallic symbol of “thumb” and “match” ready to “light up.” In the next stanza, the scissors become the male genital, and cutting represents intercourse. The speaker recommends the safety of “rubber,” even though it might “pinch a little skin” as the lover “snip[s] along,” because you should be “careful” for “someone you love.” The third stanza urges reassurance in the face of performance anxiety: “Don't worry that your curve won't make a valentine.” You and your partner will form an emotional and physical “symmetry” “to guide your hand . . . with special art.” When done, the two lovers—“a heart, a heart!”—will blissfully form one valentine, one love.

“Heart of Gold” also features an adults-only subtext, while being more directly critical about what passes for love.

It's an old beer bottle
with a heart of gold. There's a lot
of defeat in those shoulders,
sprinkled with dandruff, battered
by years of huddling up
with good buddies, out of the wind.

This is no throwaway bottle.
Full of regret and sad stories,
here it comes, back into your life
again and again, ready to stand
in front of everyone you know
and let you peel its label off.

Now, from the wet formica tabletop,
it lifts its sweet old mouth to yours. (7)

Any sweetness fades quickly following the title, and even that seems positive only at a glance. The lover is compared to a beer bottle, but not the “throwaway” variety. For all her flaws—“dandruff,” “defeat in those shoulders,” perhaps “battered” by “good buddies”—she is a keeper. If you abuse her, she will simply allow her defenses and perhaps even her clothing to be peeled away, bringing her “sweet old mouth to yours”—even on a “formica tabletop.” Is the title an allu-

sion to the Neil Young song, with the two lovers both “getting old,” both mining for that elusive “heart of gold”?

There are darker possibilities. Is this the clichéd whore with a heart of gold—always available, willing to shrug off any indignity, readily exposed and available on a kitchen counter if need be? Worse, is this a love poem to alcohol, which perhaps comes “back into [his] life/again and again”? In this reading, the bearer of the “heart of gold” is literally, as the poem says, “an old beer bottle” with a “mouth” ready to be lifted for a gulp, not a kiss. This valentine can easily be seen as an ode to addiction and/or prostitution.

Similarly, “The Bluet” is about another woman of questionable virtue, featuring another “heart of gold” or, at least, yellow, as in the center of this flower.

Of all the flowers, the bluet has
the sweetest name, two syllables
that form on the lips, then fall
with a tiny, raindrop splash
into a suddenly bluer morning.

I offer you mornings like that,
Fragrant with tiny blue blossoms—
Each with four petals, each with a star
At its heart. I would give you whole fields
of wild perfume if only

you could be mine, if you were not—
like the foolish bluet (also called
Innocence)—always holding your face
To the fickle, careless, fly-by kiss
Of the Clouded Sulphur Butterfly. (25)

The speaker likes the flower’s “sweetest name,” which he links to the cleansing purity of a raindrop; and he likes that it is “also called Innocence.” He would bring his lover plenty of beautiful purity “fragrant with tiny blue blossoms” if only she would become innocent. Instead, she holds her “face/ to the fickle, careless, fly-by kiss/ of the Clouded Sulphur Butterfly.” In so doing, she lives up to, or down to, the *double entendre* of her other name, “bluet.” To strengthen the allusion to oral sex, the poem notes that the word’s distinct “two syllables . . . form on the lips.” Then “a tiny raindrop,” or something like that, occurs. Similarly, the kiss, in the last stanza, with the evil “Clouded Sulphur Butterfly” is “fly-by”—i.e., both casual and near

the fly. This erotic subtext would not be out of place in some valentines, if the speaker were playfully promising such intimacy to his love. Instead, despite his reference to “wild perfume,” he seems to deny the sensual nature of this woman, whom he imagines as having “a star/ at [her] heart.” The saccharine sweetness of this valentine comes from the speaker, not from the woman or Kooser.

Yes, this poem is a dark valentine, since this couple will not achieve a meeting of minds—or of anything else—but this is really light verse. How could a poem in which the woman is practically named *Fellatia* not be playful? It seems that the more ill-conceived the love in the valentines, the funnier they get. Some other examples: We chuckle at the conceit of “Song of the Ironing Board,” which likens an ironing board to a woman who has had too “many hands lay hot on . . . [her] belly” (13); we laugh at “Oh, Mariachi Me,” the Latino version of the country music standard “Oh, Lonesome Me,” even though it shows us a pathetic poser who knows nothing about love, as he clutches his “dead guitar”—yes, another *double entendre* (41); we smile ruefully at the disregard of the man in “If You Fell Sorry” when he tells his partner “not to feel sorry for [herself]” because she’s better off than the “little paper poppies/left in the box when the last of the candy is gone” (27). These poems of love failing or never happening—mock valentines—are too amusing to be considered laments, and too clever to be called sentimental.

In that spirit, I’ll end with one more mock valentine. “For You, Friend,” offers the book’s funniest look at how delusional love can be, even as it resembles a beautiful love lyric, perhaps a particular one:

For You, Friend,
 this Valentine’s Day, I intend to stand
 for as long as I can on a kitchen stool
 and hold back the hands of the clock,
 so that wherever you are, you may walk
 even more lightly in your loveliness;
 so that the weak, mid-February sun
 (whose chill I well feel from the face
 of the clock) cannot in any way
 lessen the lights in your hair, and the wind
 (whose subtle insistence I will feel
 in the minute hand) cannot tighten
 the corners of your smile. People

drearly walking the winter streets
 will long remember this day:
 how they glanced up to see you
 there in a storefront window, glorious,
 strolling along on the outside of time. (19)

The salutation “For You, friend,” emphasizes that the speaker will not be with his love on this Valentine’s Day, as does “wherever you are.” His choice of the word “friend” does not belie his clearly romantic longing for her. Her lack of a name only makes her seem more like an ideal than an individual. The valentine mimics Byron’s “She walks in Beauty” with “You may walk/ even more lightly in your loveliness.” Both poems feature otherworldly light enhancing the woman’s hair and facial expression; these women are ideals of feminine purity. In the last lines of both poems, the woman stands literally and symbolically elevated above the ordinary world. The valentine’s woman serenely looks down at the parade below of “People drearily walking the winter streets.” Byron’s woman is commonly thought to represent a timeless ideal attainable only in art. So, it seems, does Kooser’s.

So where’s the joke? This lyric seems to come right out of those nineteenth-century Valentines Writers, where hostile critics would place this entire book . . . that is, until we notice that the valentine’s nameless, timeless woman is “in a storefront window” somewhere. Can it be? Kooser’s lyric is to a mannequin. It is less a valentine than a mock valentine.

William Logan accuses Kooser of “sentiment all the way down, enough to fill a lard bucket.” I do not think such readers can recognize a joke or irony—at least, not after they have made up their mind not to. Perhaps Kooser’s reputation as wholesome precedes the experience of his poetry, sometimes to its detriment. A senior citizen from Nebraska writing valentines! How could they not be sweet and simple?

However, Kooser’s *Valentines* is not a sentimental collection—not even close. Some of the pieces, such as “A Map of the World,” in particular, meet our expectations for love poetry, but are certainly too complex, nuanced, and engaging to justify such a charge. Other poems, like “Screech Owl” and “Home Storage Barns,” use extended metaphor to show us those who live without a partner; they present the pain of death and loneliness—hardly traditional Valentine’s Day fare. The more ironic, parodic, and often lascivious poems subvert

such fare in a different way: with playful, anti-sentimental humor. Indirectly, they can still be seen as love poetry, but not the kind decorated by paper hearts and flowers. Rather, this breed of love poetry is more like a couple enjoying a shared, private understanding. Arent such understandings the fabric of love?

In a 2008 interview on NPR, interviewer Melissa Block asked Kooser about “The Hog-nosed Snake”—as mischievously phallic as any poem could be: the snake “lies on its back as stiff as a stick;/ If you flip it over it’ll flip back quick” (45). He explained that he wrote it as a “prank” to his wife Kathleen—a humorous reference to their intimacy, their love. In *Valentines*, Kooser shows that such irony can make both effective valentines and poetry. The broader joke, though, might be between Kooser and other “loved ones,” who will hesitate before tossing this collection aside like last year’s greeting cards.

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NOTE

¹This quotation actually derives from act 4 of Henrik Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People*, in which Dr. Stockmann says, “The majority *never* has right on its side . . . The minority is always in the right” (255-56, italics in original). However, it has been widely attributed to George Bernard Shaw, a fact which supports the assertions in the quotation!

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COMMENTARY AND INTERVIEW: TED KOOSER'S ARTISTIC PERCEPTION

JEFFREY HOTZ

THE COMMENTARY

In his autobiographical *Journey to a Place of Work: A Poet in the World of Business* (1998), Ted Kooser, the 2004 - 2006 Poet Laureate Consultant to the Library of Congress, characterizes his career as an insurance executive at the Lincoln Benefit Life Company in Lincoln, Nebraska, as a battle between the timeless abstractions of the corporation and the need to appreciate the details of everyday life. Describing the corporation as a “dislocation” (10) and a form of “penance . . . to secure the concrete and particular life of my home in the country” (9), Kooser writes with urgency about the need to remain conscious of the concrete details of life while in the workplace in order to stay human (9-10). His goal in the office, he recounts, was to “exercise the part of my mind that responds to the local and particular” (11). *Journey to a Place of Work*, published one year before his 1999 retirement from a 35-year career in the insurance business is a paean to the specific, oft-ignored textures of office life, whether of “Eberhard Faber number 2 yellow enameled pencils” or “family photographs” on a desk (Lund 15). Near the end of *Journey to a Place of Work*, Kooser comments on a quality of perception that epitomizes both successful insurance work and powerful poetry: “if you pay attention to the physical world in which you live, whether it is an office in a tall building or a six-by-six inch square of dirt in a flower bed, you have the power to bring yourself into the present moment, and within the moment, time can stand still” (33). For Kooser, the secret behind the successful journey through a day of work, or the successful poem, involves wresting the particular from the abstract: revealed in this process is the fact that “objects

are the conveyances for certain types of emotions” (Kooser, Ted. Personal interview. 18 Sept. 2006).

A theme throughout Ted Kooser's twelve volumes of poetry, from his first book *Official Entry Blank* (1969) to the more recent *Delights & Shadows* (2004) and *Valentines* (2008), is the perception of person and place within two distinct moments: in the immediate perception by a speaker and in the emerging associations that the initial perception sparks in the speaker's imagination. In the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Delights & Shadows*, for example, the landscapes and rural towns of the poet's native Iowa and current home in Garland, Nebraska, become intertwined with the texture of childhood and memory: the “delights and shadows” of times past, populated by deceased and absent family and friends. The breadth and stillness of the Great Plains—portrayed in miniature scenes of people in towns, simple everyday objects, the movements of animals, and changes in the weather—correlate with the speaker's own inner meditations as he contemplates growing older. At the center of *Delights & Shadows*, and in much of Kooser's poetry, is the contrast between an awareness of mortality and the abiding presence of the past in the constancy of objects within the world. Perception occurs in a doubly enfolded present moment in which the speaker beholds an everyday object, singles it out from the world, and then engages in sudden, thoughtful reflection that connect him to the object in meaningful ways. The poem, the fruit of meditation, preserves a discrete moment that allows for an opportunity when, as Kooser puts it, “time can stand still” (*Journey* 33). In a 2004 interview with Deborah Solomon for the *New York Times Magazine*, Kooser describes the power and mystery of poetry in terms of capturing, through attentive and artistic perception, the richness of seemingly ordinary experiences: “poetry can enrich everyday experience, making our ordinary world seem quite magical and special” (21).

Kooser's poems, one can argue, explore perception in a phenomenological manner, what the late literary philosopher and literary critic Maurice Natanson saw as the individual's “life-world . . . the common-sense reality of human beings in their daily lives, understood in terms of . . . human beings' interpretation and understanding” (43). Kooser's poetry assiduously preserves the tensions at play in the stillest moments of perception. The poet's bout with tongue and lymph node cancer, diagnosed and treated in the summer of 1998, heightened his attention to momentary perception that runs through

his poetry and inspired the 2001 volume *Winter Morning Walks: One Hundred Postcards to Jim Harrison* (Stillwell 401). In a 2005 interview with Stephen Meats, Kooser reflected about his own cancer that “the nearness of death made me very aware of everything in the world around me” (340). Picking up on the impact of cancer on his work in a 2007 talk to medical students at the University of Nebraska Medical School, Kooser discussed his cancer treatment. He related the poet’s careful observation of the world with the requirement of the physician to listen fully to a patient’s self-reporting and to understand the whole person without jumping to hasty diagnoses (Mangan A48). Drawing an implicit analogy between the poet’s and the physician’s *modus operandi*, Kooser described his own approach to writing: “I look for specific and concrete details to evoke a scene” (Mangan A48).

In September 2006, while preparing a paper on Kooser’s imagination of rural America in *Delights & Shadows* for an academic conference, I contacted Ted Kooser by e-mail to request an interview. Within twenty-four hours he responded, inviting a conversation by e-mail first, followed by a phone conversation if needed. This past summer for this special edition of *Midwestern Miscellany*, Ted Kooser answered a few more questions and also contributed a new poem, “Those Summer Evenings,” to the journal. Kooser’s graciousness in these two interviews corresponds to his view of the nobility and compelling nature of individual people, places, and things when listened to with care and attention.

THE INTERVIEW (VIA E-MAIL
SEPTEMBER 18, 2006 AND AUGUST 2, 2012)

JH: In *Delights & Shadows* many poems seem to evoke moods of quiet awe and loneliness in response to nature. For instance, after dislodging a quartz pebble with his boot, the speaker in “On the Road” confesses that he “could almost see through it / into the grand explanation.” He then seems taken aback by this prospect and listens to another voice to “put it back and keep walking.” In “A Glimpse of the Eternal,” the sparrow’s landing on the branch is presented as timeless in a way almost beyond comprehension. Do you see the rhythms of nature as spiritual—hinting at the core of one’s being—in a way that defies explanation? If you had to explain this, though—I realize the problem of the question—how would you?

TK: I believe that everything around us—nature, each other, and so on—are all parts of one universal unity, and that we can glimpse that unity in many ways, one of them being a sense of union with nature. If it's true, as I believe, that the universe started as a speck and expanded into everything we know, then all parts are related. When I'm lucky I can sometimes connect rather disparate parts of that unity, making sense of them.

JH: In the poems "Mother" and "Father" from *Delights & Shadows*, the speaker connects the memories of his parents' lives with the landscape. In "Mother" the speaker memorializes the mother's life in terms of enduring natural rhythms: "wild plums / bloom[ing] at the roadside," "star petaled / blossoms," "the meadowlarks" and the "two geese" that return annually. In "Father," the depiction of what the father's life would have been had he lived to his ninety-seventh birthday is connected to "driving from clinic to clinic" and "trying to read / the complicated, fading map of cures." This vision of what life might have been—living to a perhaps unnaturally old age through medicine—is contrasted with a natural image of the father's birth with the "lilacs in bloom" that the father's mother saw at the moment of birth. Do you see the repetitive patterns of nature as suggestive of the timelessness of persons and/or memories? In these two poems, there is a sense of hopefulness despite "the storm" in "Mother" and the imagination of advanced old age in "Father." Are nature and her patterns hopeful or reassuring? What do they reassure us of?

TK: I find them reassuring. The reassurance comes from my sense, as suggested above, that all things are related, interrelated. In other words, there is a binding order to the universe. I don't believe in a god that has a personality, but in a complex universal system of order.

JH: Many of the poems in *Delights & Shadows* discuss memory. Simple everyday objects, like a necktie, a tea cup, or buttons, evoke memories of persons or entire communities (like in "Creamed Corn"). In the poem "Garage Sale," the objects for sale offer a portrait of the widow's husband as an energetic man with his tools. The speaker then wonders, "Where can he be / while I chat with you [the widow] about the rain." The poem ends with the speaker stating, "I walk so empty-handed to my car," seemingly without a clear answer to the question and without a purchase. In what sense do objects explain who we are (or were) or who others are (or were)? Are objects the "material words" of people's lives and of our collective

histories, which we should pay attention to in order to understand ourselves?

TK: It does seem that objects are the conveyances for certain kinds of emotions. I'd venture that if I gave you a chipped cup and saucer that you had never seen before, and let you keep it around and think about it for a while, it would begin to reveal a little history to you. Sure, that may come about as a projection of your imagination, but that's just as good.

JH: Do you feel that your poems capture and preserve the fleeting realizations that people have in everyday life as they go through their lives? Do you see the story of your life as it is manifested in your poetry, while different in the particulars, similar at its core to the life that any person lives? Is it the same in the way that, say every robin appears to be the same to a human observer (even though all robins have different lives)?

TK: All of our lives are in essential ways the same. We are all driven by the same urges and hungers and lusts and are, at base, the same species of animal. It's the veneer of civilization that makes us look different. You wear a red cap and I wear a blue one, but at the centers of our brains, in the ancient brain, we're all pretty much the same.

JH: At the end of the preface of *Local Wonders* there is an incredible description of your book in your Garland mailbox — the very book that the reader is now reading — “carefully wrapped in clean butcher paper and tied with grocery string, with the proper postage in American flag stamps purchased from Iris Carr, the Garland postmistress . . .”(xv). Your individual life here seems almost personally addressed to the reader. In depicting the form of the actual book that the reader is reading (in *Local Wonders*), do you imagine the reader as someone who is very close to you, a person in whom you confide?

TK: I do want to have a close friendship with my readers, confidential in the sense of my conveying confidences.

JH: In the beginning of “Summer” in *Local Wonders* you describe two unprotected men in a pick-up truck spraying out herbicides that drift in all directions. You talk about the tragic dangers of this to the men themselves, to the environment, and to other farmers and members of the community. What are your thoughts on environmentalism and development in rural communities? Do you worry about your community in southeastern Nebraska retaining its identity?

TK: These small rural communities are changing dramatically, due to all sorts of factors, economic mostly. We will never again see the

rural life that I knew as a boy. I'm sad about that, but it's a selfish sadness and is all about me. I am often terribly homesick for the world I knew as a boy. The modern world has brought medicine to a more responsive level, and that's wonderful, and I think we have made progress in race relations and education, but there aren't a lot of other things about our lives that seem to me to be better than what we had fifty years ago.

JH: During the question period after a presentation of essays on your work at the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature's annual conference in May 2012, discussion turned to your views on politics and art. Do you see your poems as having a political sensibility or expressing a larger social advocacy? If so, how does this orientation emerge in your poetry and what is this perspective? Likewise, how would you describe the political, social messages found in your prose writing in works like *Local Wonders: Seasons in the Bohemian Alps* or *Lights on a Ground of Darkness*?

TK: The introductory section of *Local Wonders* talks about politics in Nebraska, but I don't recall getting further into it than that. I do talk about the county spraying poison in the roadside ditches, but when I think about the book now, not having looked at it for a while, it doesn't seem political. Perhaps I'm forgetting too much. I have written a few poems with political messages, but they are far from my best work. That kind of poem falls into the category of occasional verse, and writing for occasions just doesn't work for me, and it rarely seems to work for anybody else, either.

It might be interesting to your readers to learn that shortly after I was named Poet Laureate, the press began asking me whom I was going to vote for for President, 2004 being an election year. I somehow had the good sense to point out that the Library of Congress is the people's library, and that I didn't think it was appropriate to politicize the position in any way. This saved me having to talk about politics for the next two years, and I had twice the audience for what I wanted to say about poetry than I would have had if I had taken a side.

JH: Can you talk about the experience of writing books for children? For instance, how did *Bag in the Wind* (illustrated by Barry Root) and *House Held Up by Trees* (illustrated by Jon Klassen) develop? What do you see as some of the challenges and unique opportunities in addressing this audience?

TK: I have always loved illustrated volumes and have a big library of fine children's books. Trying to write a children's book wasn't a

significant artistic decision for me. I just thought it would be fun. And it has been. Children's literature is in great part about pleasure, and is, in comparison with poetry, refreshingly free of professional critical opinion, which so weighs down contemporary writing and art. I haven't thought a lot about what I'm doing in these books, but I am, indeed, having a fine time writing them and watching them develop in the hands of good illustrators. I have a third book on the way as I write this, and a couple of others in manuscript. I have a three-year-old granddaughter, and it's also fun for me to write with her in mind.

JH: *Winter Morning Walks: One Hundred Postcards to Jim Harrison* is one of my favorite collections of yours. First, how important was it for you both as an artist and as a person that Jim Harrison was the original audience for these poems? Second, can you discuss how the objective description of the weather forecast for a particular day at the start of each postcard interacts with the content of the poems themselves? Why did you add this element to each poem?

TK: Dan Gerber, a fine poet and friend of mine, and a friend of Jim Harrison for almost fifty years, told me once that he thinks this is my best book, and perhaps he's right, though I am very fond of both *Lights on a Ground of Darkness* and *Delights & Shadows*. The poems arose out of a lot of suffering, and perhaps the energy I was putting into trying to stay alive comes through somehow. I chose Jim to send the poems to, day after day, because he is himself very good at the short poem, and he and I had exchanged many (a number of which became the substance of *Braided Creek*). We were already comfortable with a bare exchange of poems with little accompanying explanation or commentary. As to why I started each poem with a notation about the weather, I have a habit of making a note of the weather at the beginning of each entry in my daily journals, and it seemed a way of helping to establish a specific physical and emotional place in which the poems could come about.

JH: What are you reading right now?

TK: I am always reading a stack of books, a little in one volume, then a little in another, and I read all sorts of things. Today I have been reading a few pages in a P. D. James mystery, a few pages in a Jan Morris book about people she'd met in her travels, and like every day, this morning I read the day's entry in *The Assassin's Cloak: An Anthology of the World's Greatest Diarists*. And I also read the day's entry in Donald Culross Peattie's *An Almanac for Moderns*, and several other books set up with entries for each day, one of these being

made up of quotations from Emerson, another from Merton's journals, and so on. I feel no obligation to read books to the end just because I've started them, and most fall behind as I drift from interest to interest.

JH: What can readers expect in the future from Ted Kooser?

TK: I'm seventy-three now, and I'd like to do one more book of poems, but I don't want to do one until I feel that it will be a better book than *Delights & Shadows*. I'm a long way from finishing. I have a couple of hundred poems that have been published in journals, but of those there aren't more than two dozen that I feel to be good enough for a book. And I want to continue to write children's books and may try a book of children's poems. After all, some of my critics, knowing that I come down on the side of clarity and accessibility, probably think I've been writing for children all along.

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A SMALL AID FOR KOOSER RESEARCH

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With the exception of early essays by George von Glahn and Mark Sanders (MC), serious critical scholarship on the writings of Ted Kooser began after the 1980 release of the now classic *Sure Signs*, Kooser's fifth major collection of poems. Looking back over the thirty-plus years since then, only about a dozen or so significant studies—none book-length—currently boulder out against the relative flatscape of secondary materials constituted mostly by quick and dirty reviews. Aside from the essays by Wes Mantooth, Allan N. Benn, and Mary K. Stillwell in this special issue of *Midwestern Miscellany*, the following works particularly stand out and, in my view, must be consulted by the Kooser scholar: David Baker's "Ted's Box"; William Barillas's Chapter 7 of *The Midwestern Pastoral*; Victor Contoski's "Words and Raincoats"; Dana Gioia's "The Anonymity of the Regional Poet"; Jeff Gundy's "Among the Erratics"; Jonathan Holden's "The Chekov of American Poetry"; Denise Low's "Sight in Motion"; David Mason's "Introducing Ted Kooser"; and Mary K. Stillwell's "The 'In Between'" and "When a Walk Is a Poem."

Like the blind feeling into the elevator with their porcupine quills (as they do in Kooser's enchanting poem, "The Blind Always Come as Such a Surprise"), such news about the state of Kooser scholarship may come as a surprise. Kooser, published from early on with strong presses and in major literary journals does not even have a listing in the first volume of Philip Greasley's 2001 *Dictionary of Midwestern Literature*, which is intended to cover the lives and works of not only established, but also emerging, contemporary Midwestern authors. One wonders how all this can be when Kooser started receiving national attention since the mid-1970s (largely due

to William Cole's ahead-of-the-curve praises in several issues of *Saturday Review*), and since then has won prestigious honors and awards: two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships (1976 and 1984), the Stanley Kunitz Prize (1984), the Pushcart Prize (1984), the Richard Hugo Prize (1994), the James Boatwright Award (2000), two appointments as the US Poet Laureate (2004-2006), the Pulitzer Prize for poetry (2005) and much more.

Explanations for Kooser's undervaluation have been offered: his work is so transparent that there are no interpretive problems for critics to feel a sense of worth by solving (Gioia ARP 92); the literary establishment is dismissive of writers of the American Midwest, especially when they focus on "small towns and agricultural countryside" (92; see Mason ITK 10); Kooser spent thirty years working in insurance instead of schmoozing in academic circles (10); and so on. Whatever the truth may be, I believe the days of worrying about why Kooser is not receiving adequate attention are numbered. Before us are sure signs that a storm of critical notice is imminent. Aside from the accolades and the enduring promotion by the eminent Gioia, consider the following: the 2005 Kooser tribute issue of *Midwest Quarterly*; this very Kooser issue of *Midwestern Miscellany*; the long-looming release (hopefully in Fall 2012) of Stillwell's book-length study *Bright Lights Flying Behind*; and, finally, the research tools created (1) by myself, a labor of love that I will be donating to Love Library at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, (2) by Steven Schneider, a project that Kooser believes is the best published bio-bibliographical piece on him, and (3) by Daniel Gillane, a purportedly exhaustive bibliography that, despite an unforeseen hiccup with the University of Nebraska Press a few years back, will hopefully appear soon.

Even with the upsetting news that Sanders's proposed book, *The Weight of the Weather*, has been put on indefinite hiatus due to claims by several presses that Kooser is not important enough to merit such extended critical study, I am highly encouraged by these first plump raindrops. My goal in this essay, which is intended as a companion to my bibliographic project, is to provide a small research aid for the looming downpour of researchers. I hope to facilitate Kooser scholarship primarily by cataloguing the major preoccupations of commentators over the course of his career. In addition to providing an overview of commonly discussed preoccupations, influences, themes, topics, and so on (a circumscription meant to provide some

enabling constraint on the process of developing research projects), I will highlight several specific directions for research that come to mind along the way. Pretty much everything is still open for investigation. But I think it is helpful to be aware, even at this nascent stage of Kooser studies, of what has been largely attended to.

Most commentators have noted Kooser's power to draw unexpected associations between drastically different phenomena and how such association making has the effect of showing the familiar to be exotic—and vice versa (see Kooser JMI 17). Flip open one of his books, place your finger at random, and you will find him busy disclosing kinships (see Barillas 211 and 238; Bunge 51; Kooser MQI 336). Open *Sure Signs*; in "The Salesman" we see the kinship between stockings and batwings. In "Christmas Eve" we see the kinship between an old man's heart and the fluttering of an injured bird. Open *Delights & Shadows*; in "A Rainy Morning" we see the kinship between the woman pumping the wheels of her wheelchair and the pianist bending forward to strike the keys. Open *Weather Central*; in "The Sweeper" we see the kinship between the sweeping of Kooser's father and the paddling of a gondolier.

Kooser's most talked about association-making device is metaphor (see Allen 175; Barillas 216; Hansen; Low SM; Mason MRW 190; Stillwell IB 99). The many commentators who highlight Kooser's mastery of metaphor tend to focus on the small instances of kinship: stockings and batwings. What often goes overlooked is that Kooser, like the metaphysical poet John Donne, is a master of the sustained metaphor—the conceit: a complex and protracted comparison between apparently drastically different things (see Kooser DBI). A paradigm example of Kooser's mastery of the conceit is "Etude" (from *Weather Central*), a poem that he describes as his strongest and most representative work (MQI; DBI). Over the course of the poem, Kooser highlights shared features between the blue heron fishing in the cattails and the blue-suit at his business desk writing a love letter: both are armed, for example, with sharp tools (pencil or beak) in their stealthy pursuit of the catch. Kooser's facility with conceit is so refined, in fact, that on occasion he will extend a metaphor into other poems. Still apparently possessing its lover features, for example, the heron makes another *Weather Central* appearance in "A Poetry Reading," where it finally catches the fish from "Etude" (see Stillwell IB 100). Study of Kooser's power for conceit, which perhaps should involve the meta-

physical poets from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, is one of the most important topics that I will mention here.

It is crucial to remember that there are many other devices besides metaphor that Kooser uses to make associations. There is simile, for example. In the Thoreau-like collection of essays, *Local Wonders*, Kooser speaks of a “big bullsnake” with “spots like cogs.” There is also analogy (comparison of relationships). In “Abandoned Farmhouse” (from *Sure Signs*) “toys are strewn in the yard / like branches after a storm.” There is also personification (see Gioia ARP 97; Holden). In “Spring Plowing” (from *Sure Signs*) mice flee with their squeaky carts, and in “In Late Spring” (from *Weather Central*) tulips wear lipstick—facts that, as Kooser himself admits, make these poems resemble Disney animated features (MQI 338; see Cryer). There is also metonymy (see Nathan and Nathan 413). At one point in *A Book of Things*, Kooser uses song as a metonym for bird: “The nest of some tiny bird, / each blade of dead grass / seemingly spun into its place / on the potter’s wheel / of her busy movements, / preparing a vessel for song.” Unique verb use is one of the most under-noticed devices that Kooser uses to disclose kinships. “In Houses at the Edge of Town” (from *Sure Signs*) he speaks of gardens *wading* and cucumbers *crawling*. Further investigation of Kooser’s use of these more marginal association devices is worthwhile.

Kooser claims that his association-making power is a natural gift that shows itself spontaneously (DBI). Taking him at his word here, it behooves the biographical researcher to look into possible early nourishment of his unique ability. It has been commonly noted that Kooser’s father, despite not being a writer himself, had a fairly strong impact on Kooser’s interest in and talent for writing. Not only was he such a talented story man that people would rather hear him describe a person than see that person themselves, he also had “an interest in the theater” and, along with his wife, “belonged to a group that got together to read plays” in the family living room (Kooser MQI 335). A fact that has not been equally attended to, however, is that Kooser’s father also had an important influence on Kooser’s particular interest in association making. In a poignant episode that has never left his mind, Kooser recalls once hearing his father describe a fat but graceful woman as moving “like a piano on castors” (Cryer).

I have mentioned Kooser’s father as a general influence, but what about literary influences, past and contemporary? Kooser has remarked that his childhood home was filled with a unique selection

of books: Shakespeare, Balzac, Alexandre Dumas (père), Ibsen, and John Fox Jr. (MQI 335). Although Kooser pored over every piece in that collection (335), few commentators have worked out the literary connections. Many significant things can be said. Shakespeare, for instance, often employed Kooser's signature device: the conceit, which is largely why he is considered a proto-metaphysical poet. In *As You Like It* he famously makes an extended comparison between the real world of people and the real world of actors ("all the world's a stage"). Balzac, like Kooser, found it important to convey his points through concrete details rather than abstractions. John Fox Jr. kept a detached tone in his novels, typical of the naturalist literary movement to which he belonged. Kooser, too, takes such a tone in much of his writing (see Mantooh): like a traditional journalist, which Fox in fact was, Kooser often does not directly explore buried motivations behind actions; "a reporter," as Baker says, "not an editorialist," Kooser is more interested in surfaces (OR 36). And so on.

What about more contemporary figures? Kooser's addiction to the "rush" of highlighting kinships (JMI 16-17) that testify to the "impersonal" and the "universal order" (MQI 336) makes for a major connection with the Ezra Pound of the paradigmatic Imagist poem, "In a Station of the Metro": "The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough." No doubt Kooser is a proponent of the Imagist mission to highlight the repetition of forms and patterns throughout nature. And it seems clear that both Kooser and Pound endeavor to unlock, bring to attention, overlooked features of items, events, or processes by way of surrounding these items, events, or processes with others that, despite being different (and in the best case scenario *drastically* different), possess the features, too (see Baker TB 345).

This Kooser-Pound connection is not often discussed. Their disagreements take our attention. Kooser complains that with poets like Pound and T. S. Eliot, who use difficult words and exotic allusions, one often needs an encyclopedia nearby to figure out what is being said. Kooser himself does not do such intricate research when writing poems (Low SM 396), and the chief principle of his poetics is to convey ideas in the simplest of terms (Kooser MQI 341; DBI). It is true that these figures, especially due to their elitism, are largely negative influences on Kooser (see Barillas 211). But more thorough work is warranted.

The priority Kooser gives to directness and accessibility has inspired commentators to connect him with William Carlos Williams (see Allen 175; Brummels 348; Dacey 354; Holden; Nathan and Nathan 414; Mason ITK 10; Singer; Stillwell IB 98; WWP 404): both wed literary and colloquial language; both often focus on plains life; both admire the visual arts; both tend to appeal directly to the senses rather than to the intellect with abstract concepts¹; and the list goes on. To be sure, more needs to be said about their both taking seriously the mimetic enterprise of bringing into relief everyday objects and happenings, be it a farmhouse or the act of ice skating, with free verse poetry sparse and accessible. After all, Williams's *Selected Poems* inspired Kooser to stop posing as a poet (to impress girls) and become a real one (Kooser MQI 337). Moreover, Kooser says that Williams serves as a model for "local" writing (Stillwell WWP 404). Williams's *In the American Grain* is, in fact, one of Kooser's all-time-favorite books.

Given the stress put on how much these two are alike, it is especially important for the researcher not to forget some key differences. Williams, unlike Pound, was not so much driven to disclosing the repetition of forms in nature—let alone devising sustained comparisons like Kooser and Donne. To be sure, both Kooser and Williams attempted the long poem: Williams with *Paterson* and Kooser with *Winter Morning Walks*. As Mason has pointed out, however, *Paterson* is a loosely connected mosaic that—due to its obliqueness and obscurity—is closer "in method to T. S. Eliot than [Williams] would have liked to admit." On the other hand, *Winter Morning Walks*, Mason goes on, is "a sequence of well-made miniatures" that can stand alone, that are clear, and that fit tightly together (MRW 188). Some commentators have even been willing to stand by the view that Kooser is more succinct than Williams (Greening RWC 509). The Kooser-Williams relation is complex and warrants major study.

In speaking of Williams's influence, we must not overlook that of Karl Shapiro. Several commentators have noted his influence on Kooser and the affinity between them (see Budy 349; Contoski RLH 112; Cryer; Evans 357; Kuzma 374; Sanders PK 418). Much more detailed study is called for, nevertheless. Here are some facts about their relation to get the researcher up and running. Kooser studied Williams in graduate school at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln under the tutelage of Shapiro, who impressed upon Kooser, among

other things, a desire to write about the inanimate (Kooser MQI 337; MSI 104). Their intimacy came at a price, however. Because he spent all of his time working on poetry with Shapiro, Kooser lost his English Department teaching assistantship in 1964 on the grounds of scholastic deficiency (Sanders PK 415). In 1969, Shapiro helped Kooser get his first collection, *Official Entry Blank*, published, taking the manuscript to the University of Nebraska Press on Kooser's behalf (Kooser MQI 337). In the introduction to *Local Habitation* (1974) Shapiro says that Kooser's poems are like photographs (Contoski RLH 112)—one of the highest compliments one could receive from Shapiro, who taught that poetry is a way of *seeing* rather than a way of *saying* (Budy 349). As with Kooser, Shapiro's poetry has quick clear lines and subject matter that, although quotidian and familiar, can be full of drama and humor (see Evans 357).

It would be beneficial to explore how Kooser was influenced not only by Shapiro's subject matter, economy, take on Williams, and especially humor, but also by—as Kooser himself suggests—Shapiro's pace, timing, syntax, and rhythms (see Kuzma 374). As noticed by Evans, Kooser picked up from Shapiro a “fondness for the prepositional phrase, which gives momentum and rhythm to his lines” (357). In poems like “Shooting a Farmhouse” (from *Sure Signs*) we see these phrases at work: “Back in the house, / the newspapers left over from packing / the old woman's dishes / begin to blow back and forth through the rooms.” Any study of Kooser's free verse scansion is going to have to refer to Shapiro, if only for this reason.²

Kooser is seen as close to Frost (see Barbieri; Brummels 348; Contoski RNC 205; Cryer; Greening RWC 508-509; Gustafson 45; Gwynn 685; Jones 280; Kuzma 377; Logan GAD 72; Logan VDM 67; Mason TKH 406; MRW 188 and 192; ITK 15). Their likeness is arguably greater than that between Kooser and Williams. Here are some of the more prominent points of similarity. (1) Even though Frost seems more concerned with meter and direct rhyme than Kooser (ITK 15), both write poems of simplicity and technique that, as Kuzma puts it, “are ever quick to lodge in the ear” (Kuzma 377; compare Gwynn 685). (2) Like Frost, Kooser can be eerily dark at times: playful and yet concerned with nastiness and death (see Mason MRW 188; TKH 406). Take the poem, “The Widow Lester,” for example. “How his feet stunk in the bed sheets! / I could have told him to wash, / but I wanted to hold that stink against him. / The day he dropped dead in the field, / I was watching. / I was hanging up sheets in the yard, / and I finished.” (3)

Frost's poems are sometimes didactic ("Carpe Diem"), and the same goes for Kooser (Contoski RNC 205): "A rule of thumb: if you can't use / your gate enough to keep it swinging, / better to leave it standing wide" (from "Gates").³ (4) Frost's poems invite rumination despite the everydayness of their expression and subject matter ("After Apple Picking"), and the same goes for Kooser. "Old Soldier's Home" (from *Sure Signs*) describes soldiers sitting on a porch and unwrapping "the pale brown packages / of their hands, folding the fingers back / and looking inside, then closing them up again / and gazing off across the grounds, / safe with the secret."⁴ (5) In contrast to Pound, Kooser and Frost (like Williams and Thoreau) do not feel the need to travel; sufficiently stimulated by the familiar, they are rooted (Greening RWC 508) and both have been called "provincial" (Mason MRW 192). It is important to remember, however, that Frost (see "Acquainted with the Night") and Kooser (see Gwynn 684; Mason TKH 404) are not against using urban settings. More importantly, both try to convey what is universal and of lasting value by way of what is local and particular. In Kooser's case, characteristic Midwestern landscapes, objects, people, and events are used to articulate experiences and feelings that all people—no matter where they live—go through (Link 308; Stillwell WWP 400; Woessner 20). The blind do not just come as a surprise to the Midwesterner.

Three related points of affinity call for study. First, Frost is a master of the conceit like Kooser. "The Silken Tent" develops a protracted comparison between a woman and a tent standing in a summer field. Kooser himself states that he models his own writing after this masterpiece of metaphor and restraint (see "Etude," for example), and he especially appreciates Frost's sensitivity here to the fact that the images described at the beginning of the poem remain on the minds of readers throughout and thus must harmonize with the end (JMI 17). Second, both authors frequently employ the second-person voice; it is one of their strategies for establishing intimacy with the reader, for showing that reader and poet are not as separate as one might believe. In "Good-bye" (from *One World at a Time*) we get: "You lean with one arm out." Indeed, throughout *Not Coming to Be Barked At*, we see a repetition of Frost's "you can" formula: "you can see the old cedars," "you can feel the great joy" (see Gustafson 45). Third, Frost's aesthetic arguably tends toward communitarianism (see Richardson), and the same goes for Kooser (see Barillas 210-211, 214, and 238; Greening RWC 509). As Barillas notes, Kooser's

poem “So This Is Nebraska” (from *Sure Signs*) displays its communitarian commitment primarily through its use of the second-person voice (210-211 and 238). This commitment is evident in Kooser and Jim Harrison’s poetry collection, *Braided Creek*, particularly in their refusal to reveal who wrote what throughout the collection (214). In a poignant show of this commitment, they go so far as to say that even death cannot take away our togetherness: “It’s nice to think that when / we’re fossils we’ll all be in the same / thin layer of rock.”

In *Official Entry Blank*, Kooser has a poem entitled “Walt Whitman,” and there are some strong similarities between the two warranting a study. Both are plainspoken (see Manzione) and concern themselves with local affairs. As Evans says, “Kooser understands Whitman’s dictum that ‘all truths wait in all things.’ He writes about anything: driving in the country, a leaky faucet, an abandoned farmhouse” (357), which is perhaps the chief reason he was so liked by Shapiro. Another key resemblance is that Kooser, like Whitman, seems to be writing one massive poem (Gioia ARP 89). Kooser also has several poems that employ Whitmanesque (and Dickinsonian) repetition (see Mason TKH 405; ITK 14). In the poem “That Was I” (from *Delights & Shadows*) we get the *ritornello* of “and that was I” at each stanza.

There are some important differences between Kooser and Whitman to be kept in mind. As Gioia explains, “Kooser (unlike Whitman and his followers) is a truly democratic poet who addresses the reader as an equal. He never assumes the pose of prophet or professor instructing the unenlightened” (ARP 94; see Barillas 213). Moreover, and as Gwynn says, “Whitman tried to capture America by making himself a kosmos, and it is only rarely, as, say, in the great catalogue of section 15 of ‘Song of Myself’ that he can restrain himself from upstaging his fellow citizens.” Kooser, on the other hand, “keeps himself in the background and doesn’t try to turn everything that he notices into a metaphor for his own sensitivity in noticing it” (684).

A study of the Kooser-Dickinson relation is needed. The epigraph to *Delights & Shadows* is from Dickinson’s 1862 letter to the Unitarian minister Thomas W. Higginson: “The Sailor cannot see the North, / but knows the Needle can.” Consideration of her poetry also happens to be important when dealing with the crucial task of understanding Kooser’s poetics, as I will now explain.⁵ One of the fundamental principles of Kooser’s poetics—indeed, the ur-principle behind most of the others—is accessibility (Kooser MQI 341; DBI;

De Grave 441-442; Stillwell WWP 406; Woessner 23). This mainly involves conveying information with Strunk-and-White clarity (Kooser DBI): eliminating “peculiarities of usage, grammar or punctuation that merely call attention to themselves” and ask the reader “to puzzle over the surface” (Kooser WOP 439). The effect is that a moderately educated nonspecialist—Kooser likes to imagine his mother (JMI 11-12)—will have no trouble following. Some commentators have taken Kooser to be saying that poetry should not deal with difficult concepts (Logan VDM 71). This is precisely where Dickinson comes into the picture. According to Kooser, Dickinson writes poetry that, while clear at the level of expression, nevertheless concerns deep matters that require rereading and meditation. Dickinson, in short, is an example of one who writes what Kooser describes as good difficult poetry (DBI).

Much work is to be done on Kooser’s relation to the above figures, as well as to several important ones left out—in particular, Thoreau (see Harvey 136), a nature writer like Kooser; Emerson (see Barillas 216; Mason TKH 407; ITK 15), who, like Kooser, sees all things as connected (see PHR 141; MQI 336); and Stevens (see Brummels 348; Greening RFN 26; RWC 509; Harvey 136; Mason ITK), an insurance executive like Kooser.⁶ In discerning Kooser’s place in literary history, we must also attend to those figures he claims exert a special influence on him: Edward Arlington Robinson, May Swenson, John Crowe Ransom, and Randall Jarrell, in addition to Frost and Williams. Kooser also says that he looks to Nancy Willard, Linda Pastan, Tomas Tranströmer, and Rolf Jacobsen for guidance and inspiration (MQI 335; CHI).

Little has been said about Kooser’s connection with these figures. Commentators have noted that the model for Kooser’s character studies in *Grass County* (1971)—especially in the poem “Tom Ball’s Barn”—was E. A. Robinson’s Tilbury Town cycle (as well as E. L. Masters’s *Spoon River Anthology*; see Gioia ARP 95). In fact, all of Kooser’s poems are accreting into one coherent assemblage, much like this cycle (and this anthology) (Baker OR 33 and 34; see Contoski RLH 112-113). Kooser tells us that Swenson’s *To Mix with Time* was one of the first poetry collections that compelled him to reread it over and over. He also says that her nature poems are particularly inspiring (MQI 335), and that he is floored by her apparent ability to “write in any form and about anything” (CHI; see PHR 4, 28, and 130). In *Writing Brave and Free*, Kooser uses a work by John

Crowe Ransom to demonstrate one of the most important requirements of poetry: that it be inviting, engaging, accessible (63-65; see PHR 4). I find several connections between Jarrell and Kooser: affinity with Frost, interest in children's literature, and commendation by Shapiro (see PHR 4). Kooser admires Willard's ability to make poems rich in metaphor and at the same time clear as Pastan (DPP). He regards her as one of the country's most inventive poets (PHR 157). Kooser praises Tranströmer's ability to cover up dissimilarities between the phenomena whose kinship he is attempting to highlight (PHR 3, 142, 165; JMI 16-17). I find that, despite referring to quotidian affairs with language that is superficially clear, Tranströmer's work is often, like Kooser's, very mysterious.⁷

The Kooser-Jacobsen relation is worthy of particular attention. Both figures have a strong concern with memorializing vanishing ways of life. Throughout his oeuvre, Kooser seems concerned with chronicling the disappearance of rural culture (Baker OR 34; Budy 351; Evans 358; Galbraith 184; Gioia ARP 93; Stillwell WWP). In fact, he finds his most important work to be the essay "Lights on a Ground of Darkness," an overt and careful chronicling effort (CHI). Jacobsen's own chronicling effort is evident in his collection *The Roads Have Come to an End Now*. The poem "De store symfoniers tid" ("The Age of the Great Symphonies") is an elegy for the age of the great symphonies, which is vanishing largely due to technological development. The elegiac tone here is prevalent in many of Kooser's works.⁸

Some reviewers have complained that Kooser's work shows no moral and political concern and that its lack of protest is a function of obliviousness to the horrors of the world (see Gustafson 45; Jones 280; Link 308). There are grounds, I think, to challenge this (see Barillas 212; Gioia ARP 90; Mason MRW 188 and 191; Stillwell WWP 407). In "December 7th" Kooser expresses his outrage, although subtly and without direct mention of himself, at offseason deer hunting (see Mason MRW 188). In general, when you look at the landscape described here in *Winter Morning Walks*, where humans—like the cancer that Kooser is battling—are portrayed as invasive users ("cutting stone from the land, building roads, turning land into fields"), there is a sense in which Kooser is engaging in political writing (Stillwell WWP 407). This seems true across Kooser's oeuvre. "Creamed Corn" (from *Delights & Shadows*) confronts unintentional racism. *Local Wonders* criticizes, among other things, reckless housing development. "The Blind Come as Such a

Surprise” “quietly raises,” as Gioia puts it, “certain moral . . . issues” (ARP 90). Indeed, referring back to the Kooser-Jacobsen discussion, I find that many of Kooser’s elegiac works have a ring of social criticism to them.⁹ Researchers might particularly be interested in studying Kooser’s politically oriented writings on Native Americans, and I think doing so will be helpful for his incorporation into Ethnic Literature courses. In *One World at a Time* we get “Geronimo’s Mirror.” *Flying at Night* contains poems referring to massacres. Barillas points out an excellent example from *Sure Signs* (212). Kooser and his son, here in the poem “Fort Robinson,” do not get out of the car to see the historical site of Crazy Horse’s 1877 assassination because the grounds crew is going from tree to tree killing magpies. The reader is nudged to draw the parallel here between these state workers and those that subjugated Native American prisoners held at Fort Robinson.

A study of sentiment in Kooser’s work is of great importance, especially since several critics have attacked him for being overly sentimental (and nostalgic) (see Galbraith 184; Logan VDM). Logan has pressed the point most forcefully, directing his energies at Kooser’s 2008 collection of Valentine’s Day poems. Valentine’s Day, however, is a holiday created in the spirit of gushiness, and so the overt sentimentality is okay here—if not, in fact, purposeful. Kooser agrees, explaining in the preface that his main goal is for readers to have fun (viii)—a goal especially evident in the several bawdy moments and the frequent parodying of sappy love poetry (see Benn in this issue). That said, Kooser is frequently on the verge of lapsing into sentimentality throughout his oeuvre (see Cryer; Galbraith 184; Gioia ARP 90; Greening RFN 26; Holden; Low SM 397; Manzione; Welch 435). As Kooser himself says (perhaps having in mind poems like “North of Alliance” and “So This Is Nebraska”): “I tend to be someone who writes with a great deal of sentiment. I’m willing to take that risk at a time when people are suspicious of sentimental poetry. But I think that is what I need to do as a poet” (DBI). What is unique about Kooser is that, in a time when so many writers are trained up in workshops to avoid “fault rather than achieve virtue” (Allen 172), he aims to achieve virtue—the virtue of stimulating the emotions of his readers (see Gioia ARP 90).

An issue for researchers to grapple with, then, is how Kooser manages to avoid lapsing into sentimentality in his poems of deep emotion. There have been several suggestions (see Kooser MSI 104;

Link 309; Low SM 397; Manzione; Welch 435). Understatement and reporter-like distance are two devices he will use to avoid tipping: “I am moved by poems in which strong feelings are present, but are held or controlled by language which is slightly detached and restrained” (MSI 104; see Low SM 397; Manzione). By describing highly emotional phenomena in a tone of detachment and/or with some form of understatement, the idea is that the result will be a balance between mawkishness and stingy-heartedness. Kooser employs another strategy as well I think: mixing moments of sentimentality and moments of humor (humor often bordering on the dark and stingy-hearted) such that the overall effect is somewhere in between. Take the poem “Father” (from *Delights & Shadows*). “Today you would be ninety-seven / if you had lived, and we would all be / miserable, you and your children, / driving from clinic to clinic, / an ancient fearful hypochondriac / and his fretful son and daughter, / asking directions, trying to read / the complicated, fading map of cures. / But with your dignity intact / you have been gone for twenty years, / and I am glad for all of us, although / I miss you every day—the heartbeat / under your necktie, the hand cupped / on the back of my neck, Old Spice / in the air, your voice delighted with stories. / On this day each year you loved to relate / that the moment of your birth / your mother glanced out the window / and saw lilacs in bloom. Well, today / lilacs are blooming in side yards / all over Iowa, still welcoming you.” You will not find understatement or detachment here. Kooser throws us right into the sad and the emotional (lines 1-2) only to yoke us away—with a masterful line break between “be” and “miserable”—into extended (purposively extra-detailed) dark humor (lines 3-8). Next he reverses course, priming us for sadness (lines 9-10), only to yoke us back into dark humor for a stint (line 11). Finally, he gives in to the seriousness of the emotion (lines 12-17), and yet prevents crumbling by putting a positive twist at the end (lines 18-20). The whipping back and forth is truth to life. When talking about a lost loved one, surely you have at least once used humor to avoid sending yourself, and those listening to you, into tears. That is an all-too-human move.

Humor in Kooser’s works is itself an excellent research topic (see Challender 352; Evans 358; Mason MRW 191), and such research would, I imagine, bring up the influence of Shapiro and Frost. What I find interesting is that Kooser often pokes fun at himself. There is, of course, the famous “Selecting a Reader,” a poem about how

Kooser's ideal reader is a woman who, after thumbing through his poems at a bookstore, decides to use the money to get her jacket cleaned instead (see Contoski WR). Or consider Kooser's playful self-reproach in "Domestics" (from *Twenty Poems*): "You take care of the house work / and leave the poetry writing to me. / Just leave the poems to me / and keep up with the house work. / I don't want to find any of your poems / lying around the house, / particularly when somebody comes to the house / to look at my poems. / And one other thing, and don't you forget it: / I'm the poet around here, / and you are the mistress of the poet. / If you think you can be the poet, forget it. / For as long as you live here, / You are the girl. I get to be the poet."

A related area in need of analysis is surrealism in Kooser's works (see Challender 353; Gioia GRS 617). Take, for instance, "They Had Torn Off My Face at the Office" (from *Sure Signs*): "The night that I finally noticed / that it was not growing back, I decided / to slit my wrists. Nothing ran out; / I was empty. Both of my hands fell off / shortly thereafter. Now at my job / they allow me to type with the stumps. / It pleases them to have helped me, / and I gain in speed and confidence." Or consider "Grating a Brain" (from *Local Habitation*), a how-to for grating a brain that involves images of a liverwurst-like mass being scraped down the sidewalk until—like well-used sidewalk chalk—only a nub remains at the terminus of the long trail. This is not the Kooser many readers first hear about! Now, reviewers sometimes say that Kooser's poems lack mystery, that they just unfold themselves completely—and that this is, in fact, one reason critics tend to be dismissive (Gioia ARP 89). Allen even says that Kooser writes the same poem over and over again, consistent as he is in tone and theme (175). There is truth to these positions, as I have indicated above in stressing that his poems form a rather coherent grouping and are accessible. Nevertheless, when we start gathering all the surreal poems into a pile, the truth of the matter becomes a bit more complex. "The old woman, asleep on her back, / pulls up her knees and gives birth / to an empty house." What exactly is going on here at the start of this poem "The Old Woman" (from *Sure Signs*)?

One under-researched topic is Kooser's interest in painting. Except perhaps for Steven Schneider (and of course Stillwell's superb essay in this special issue of *Midwestern Miscellany* on Kooser's use of chiaroscuro in both painting and writing), no one has

really focused on Kooser and the visual arts: photography, drawing, painting, and so on. Not only is Kooser an avid fan of painting and of the American realist painter, Edward Hopper, he has studied the basic techniques of drawing and watercolor at Iowa State University and is himself a lifelong painter—mostly of 5x7 miniatures (Kooser DBI). Painting is, in fact, Kooser’s most important form of artistic expression after poetry (MQI 338 and 342). Included in his small 1971 poetry collection *Grass County* are his own illustrations (see Gioia ARP 94). He has also written odes to painters. “A Box of Pastels” (from *Delights & Shadows*), for instance, is a celebration of Mary Cassatt. Kooser engages in ekphrastic poetry, too. *Delights & Shadows*, a book full of museum visits, contains a tantalizing series of four poems on Civil War paintings by Winslow Homer (Gundy 938; see Challender 440). There we also get the poem “At the County Museum,” which patiently describes a painting of a “lacquered horse-drawn hearse” (see 440; Manzione). *Weather Central* contains an ekphrastic poem as well: “The Gilbert Stuart Portrait of Washington” (see Low SM 397). Moreover, Kooser wrote a poem for George Ault’s painting, *August Night at Russell’s Corners*, which is on the cover of *Delights & Shadows* (see Kooser JMI 12-13). It is important to note that Kooser has written poems about and painted acrylics of Guttenberg—a town in Iowa where his maternal grandparents lived and where he wants his ashes sprinkled. An interesting research project would be to compare not only these poems and the paintings, but the poems and the paintings to the long essay, “Lights on a Ground of Darkness,” which involves Kooser’s remembrances of boyhood visits to Guttenberg (14). Another interesting topic would be how Kooser understands the relation between painting and poetry. He does think that there is a big difference between the two, and that some topics that might work with poetry cannot work with painting. Painting, Kooser says, cannot really depict processes (such as recovery) the way that poetry, which can be narrative, can; painting is better suited for static phenomena, such as sickness and death (23). How Kooser’s own work as a painter affects his poetry would be another worthwhile project—especially in light of the fact that both his paintings and poems are often miniatures (DBI).

Because Kooser is in many respects a formalist, there needs to be a thorough application of formalist and neo-formalist criticism to his work. One issue concerning Kooser’s formalism is how the structure of his poems inform and are informed by their thematic content.

Explaining just that in her study of *Winter Morning Walks*, Stillwell is one of the pathblazers in this area, as she is in so many others:

Rarely more than twelve lines, frequently eight, of relatively the same length, Kooser's poems maintain a . . . restless and sometimes agitated, tetrameter that echoes his physical state as he recovers from surgery and radiation. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that nearly every tetrameter line resists scansion, seeming to vary with each reading, just as impossible to read as the poet's future health. . . [T]he poetic foot, like the poet's footing, too, varies, giving way to spondee and dactyl, avoiding the more regular and predictable iambic foot and pentameter length as he contemplates his uncertain future. (WWP 409)

Stillwell, building on the work of Hansen, executes a similar structural analysis of "Etude" and other poems in *Weather Central*: "The metaphorical form that Kooser employs in 'Etude' can be found in a number of poems . . . Tom Hansen . . . describes it as the 'three-stanza or tripartite poem which loosely parallels the ABA sonata form.' Heron . . . becomes lover becomes heron" (IB 98-99). This precedent set by Stillwell and Hansen should be carried out with other works, which Stillwell, in fact, does in her essay in this issue of *Midwestern Miscellany*. Moreover, since Kooser notes that his collections have common themes, this sort of work needs to be done at the larger scale; researchers need to figure out, that is, how the organizations of his books inform and are informed by the thematic contents. This issue is particularly pressing in light of complaints that Kooser's collections often provide, as Gioia puts it, "no clue to the principle of organization" (GRS 619). There have been brief discussions of other aspects of Kooser's formalism (see Kooser DBI; Contoski WR 86; RNC 205-206; Dacey 355-356; Gioia ARP 95), such as why he always begins his lines at the left margin (Low SM 398). But many others are in need of consideration.¹⁰

It would be interesting to examine diverging versions of Kooser's works. Seeing what he has omitted from, added to, and shifted within a poem throughout the course of its publication history allows us to see his poetical principles in action. There have been numerous cases where Kooser has revised his published poems and then published the revisions. There have been changes in title, for instance. The poem that Kooser published in the 1963 anthology, *Lyrics of Love*, called "Spinster" he changed to "Aunt Johanna, Spinster" in *Official Entry Blank* (1969). The poem that he published in *Rapport 2.1*

(1973) called “Utah” he changed to “Highway 30” in *Local Habitation* (1974). There have also been changes within poems themselves. “Splitting an Order” as published in *Prairie Schooner* 67.3 (1993) reads “keeping his shaky arms steady / by placing his forearms firm on the edge of the table.” Kooser replaces the term “arms” here with “hands” in the version that appears in his book *Valentines* (2008). “Barn Owl” as published in *Weather Central* (1994) reads: “Behind those eyes is / a boudoir of intimate darkness . . .”. Kooser replaces the “is” here with “lies” in the version that appears in *Valentines*. More drastic changes often happen. Consider the appearance of “Five Finger Exercise” in *Prairie Schooner* (1986) compared with its appearance in *Weather Central*. The 1994 version adds an extra line: “of cracked corn, of millet and linnet seed.” Consider the appearance of “The Giant Slide” in *Greenfield Review* (1978) compared with its appearance in *One World at a Time* (1985). The 1978 version reads: “Beside the highway, the Giant Slide / with its rusty undulations lifts / from the weeds. A chain link fence keeps out / the children and drunks, and the ticket booth / tilts to that side where the nickels shifted / over the years. Blue morning glories / climb halfway up the stairs, bright clusters / of laughter. Call it a passing fancy, / this slide that nobody slides down now, / bumpety-bump . . .”. The 1985 version is much different. “Beside the highway, the Giant Slide / with its rusty undulations lifts / out of the weeds. It hasn’t been used / for a generation. The ticket booth / tilts to that side where the nickels shifted / over the years. A chain link fence keeps out / the children and drunks. Blue morning glories / climb halfway up the stairs, bright clusters / of laughter. Call it a passing fancy, / this slide that nobody slides down now. . .”.¹¹

Since Kooser revises extensively prior to publishing and yearly deposits his meticulously kept notes at Love Library, there are also numerous drafts in existence that differ considerably from published versions.¹² Here is a good example. The first two lines of a draft of “The Possible Lives” read: “There were once so many I might choose among, / a warehouse of coats and shoes, and all my size.” In the version appearing in the *Hudson Review* 56.4 (2004), Kooser changed the metaphor present in the earlier version into a simile: “There were once so many I might choose among, / like a warehouse of coats and shoes, and all my size.” Kooser comments that the change was needed to prevent the reader from thinking that the subject of the first line (namely, that of which there are so many) is coats and shoes

(PHR). There are many more of these revelatory sorts of changes that have not been discussed.¹³

I have touched on several key areas of research: Kooser's proclivity for association, his influences, the place of abstraction in his work, didacticism and mystery in his work, his poetics, the effect of thirty years of business on his writing, his drive to chronicle and eulogize, the political and moral issues in his work, the threat of sentiment in his work, humor and surrealism in his work, his interest in painting, his formalism, and the comparison of differing versions of his writings. There are other key topics that I have left out due to space considerations. I will close with a smattering of these to get researchers on their way:

- (1) Kooser's gift for narrative poetry (see "The Beaded Purse" from *Delights & Shadows*) gets overlooked in the talk about him as a regional lyricist. (For more on his narrative poetry, see Contoski RLH 112; Logan GAD 73; Mason ITK 13; Stillwell WWP 399).
- (2) A study of Kooser's found poems and how he massages them into poetic form is due. Of particular interest are Kooser's postcard poems; in *Local Habitation* alone there are fifteen. What draws him to this format? (For more on his found poetry, particularly the postcard pieces, see Kooser JMI 13 and 22-23; Contoski RLH 112-113; Kloefkorn 369; Stillwell WWP 401).
- (3) Kooser has written poetry about poetry, and these poems would be interesting to study alongside his ekphrastic work (see Dacey 355; Manzione; Kooser DBI).
- (4) Kooser's confessional poetry has gone largely overlooked. He himself never mentions his confessional book, *Old Marriage and New*. Many think that he is at his weakest in these sorts of poems, but this judgment may need reconsideration. (For more on Kooser's confessional poetry, see Brummels 348; Gioia ARP 98; Link 308; see Kooser LMP).
- (5) Kooser repeatedly reveals himself to be a fabulist, providing accounts of phenomena much in the spirit of folktales about how tigers got their stripes and how ravens became black (see "The Celery Heart," "Carp," and Kooser's discussion of the "weight of the weather" in Sanders MC 71). To be sure, Low is interested in what is magical and mythic in Kooser (see NT) and Contoski talks a bit about Kooser and fables (Contoski WR 85), but few others are involved in this matter.

- (6) Uncertainty about human knowledge and achievement (see Bunge 50), loneliness and isolation (see Stitt 663), silence (see Challender 352; Contoski WR 86), and also violence, old age, and death (see Barillas 214; Bunge 51; Mason MRW 188; Kooser JMI 18; MQI; Kloefkorn 369; Logan GAD 73; Sanders MC 69) are big themes in Kooser's works in need of examination.
- (7) A study of time is also needed. Stillwell has spoken about mythic and temporal time in Kooser's works (IB 103) and Low is interested in how time in his work tends to slip around and is often cyclical (see NT).
- (8) Hands make a frequent appearance in Kooser's works (see Kooser DBI). See, for example, "Old Soldier's Home," "A Washing of Hands," "Praying Hands," "Gifted Hands," "Father," "Mourners," "Pegboard," "Splitting an Order," "A Good-bye Handshake," "February 21," "Gyroscope," and "They Had Torn Off My Face at the Office."
- (9) Worthy of attention is Kooser's skill at efficiently and satisfyingly closing his poems (see Baker TB 347; Gundy 937; Low SM 400; Manzione).
- (10) There needs to be an analysis, especially, of Kooser's use of irony (see Challender 352; Contoski WR 85), rhyme (see WR 87; Dacey 354-355; Logan VDM 66; McDougal 412), and pun (see Stillwell IB 101).
- (11) It would be nice to see work on Kooser's philosophical commitments (see Barillas 213; Stillwell IB): animism (see Link 308), pantheism (see Kooser MQI 336), fatalism (see Bunge 49; Stillwell WWP), stoicism (see Bunge 49), denial of immortality (see Kooser JMI; MQI 336), denial of a personal God (see MQI 336), and pragmatism (see PHR).
- (12) Little attention is given to Kooser's prose works of both fiction and nonfiction. This is unfortunate because Kooser does not think of himself as merely a poet (see MSI 105).
- (13) Eventually there needs to be a complete works of Kooser, together with a thorough biography and concordance.

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NOTES

- ¹For discussion of the important issue of Kooser and abstraction, see Allen 175; Gioia 90; Gundy 937; Low SM; Welch 434.
- ²Of course, when comparing these two, it behooves the researcher to look at Kooser's poem "For Shapiro, Having Gone Back to the Sonnet" (from *Official Entry Blank*), as well as at his essay "Karl Shapiro in the Early Sixties."
- ³For more on the important issue of Kooser and didacticism, see Kooser JMI 12-13; Dacey 355; Contoski RLH 113.
- ⁴For more on Kooser and mystery, see McDougall 412; compare Gioia ARP 89.
- ⁵Kooser's poetics is itself a book-length topic, and one that researchers should prepare for by consulting the *Poetry Home Repair Manual*, *Writing Brave and Free*, "Some Things I Think About When Working on a Poem," and especially Kooser's many reviews of other poets.
- ⁶For more on the important issue of how thirty years of business life affected Kooser's writing, see Kooser DBI and *Journey to a Place of Work*.
- ⁷Talk of the Tranströmer-Kooser relation naturally invites talk of the Bly-Kooser relation, which has received some attention (see Gundy 941; Low SM 399; Stitt 663). Not only does Kooser read Tranströmer through Bly's translation, but also worthy of notice is the affinity between his *Winter Morning Walks* and Bly's *Morning Poems* (see Mason MRW 188).
- ⁸There are several other figures that the scholar is going to want to consider in order to place adequately Kooser in literary history: William Stafford (see Stitt 663); Louise Glück, who Kooser says he strongly admires (MSI 104); Denise Levertov (see Manzione); Nazim Hikmet (see Manzione); Carl Sandburg, whose poems are filled with humor like Kooser's (see Evans 358); Edward Thomas, whose poems are short and deal with quotidian subjects behind which nightmare lurks (see Greening RFN 26; RWC 508); Walter John de la Mare, whose children's works especially inspire Kooser (see PHR 9-12; DBI; Kuzma 373; Logan GAD 72); Chekov (see Holden); Aldo Leopold, who believed—in line with Kooser—that everything is connected, that humans are not radically different in kind from everything else, and that things can have intrinsic value independent of their relation to humans (see Barillas 215, 217, and 239; Bunge 50; Evans 356; Low SM 400); Robert Dana (Gundy 937); Jim Harrison, Kooser's close friend and co-author in *Braided Creek*; James Wright, to whom Kooser's poem "That Was I" is perhaps a tribute, Leonard Nathan; Steven Osterlund; Greg Kuzma; William Kloefkorn; Victor Contoski; Harley Elliott; Patricia Traxler; Lucien Stryk; Warren Woessner; Jared Carter; and so on. Several commentators have even started drawing connections between Kooser and Asian poets such as Li Bai, Du Fu, and especially Basho and Issa (see Barillas 216; Evans 357; Gundy 938).
- ⁹Barillas nicely captures the political nature of "Abandoned Farmhouse" (from *Sure Signs*), a poem filled with signs of quick desertion of farmhouse in question—signs indicating that "something went wrong." "Kooser does not attribute that failure to the family that once lived in the house. . . Whatever 'went wrong' may have had as much to do with government agricultural policy and, more broadly, attitudes about the land, as with the abilities of the farming couple. Something went wrong with pastoral ideology; the failure here is not merely personal but also cultural and political" (212).
- ¹⁰When considering the formal aspects of Kooser's work, it may be helpful to keep in mind that some materials have been set to music. See *A Heartland Portrait: Five Songs for*

Baritone and Piano; Voyages through the Inland Sea: For Soprano and Clarinet; The Blizzard Voices: An Oratorio for Soloists.

- ¹¹For rare manuscripts, the researcher should go to the Don L. Love library at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. To fill in any holes, one should also consult the Jane Geske Heritage Room of Nebraska Authors at the Bennett Martin Public Library and the University of Iowa Libraries. Perhaps the following could be of help as well: the Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library at Emory University; SUNY at Buffalo libraries; Library of Congress; Kenneth Spencer Research Library; Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin; Criss Library at the University of Nebraska Omaha; and Brown University Library.
- ¹²Also, and especially in the case of the poems for *Winter Morning Walks*, Kooser mailed off drafts to his friends (Kooser JMI 10). Studying the workshop correspondences between Leonard Nathan and Kooser (and perhaps Steven Osterlund and Kooser) would be extremely helpful in seeing how he revises (11).
- ¹³Engagement in the sort of study that I have been mentioning will require access to diaries, workbooks, correspondences, personal books, and so on. In this case, the researcher might want to consult not only Love Library, which has pretty much all of such Kooser materials, but the following as well: (1) the Jane Geske Heritage Room of Nebraska Authors at the Bennett Martin Public Library; (2) Pentagram Press Archives at the University of Delaware; (3) the "Sallie Nixon Papers Relating to Ted Kooser, 1975-2005" at Wilson Library (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill); (4) the "Patricia Wilcox Papers, 1974-2002" at the Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library (Emory University); (5) the "Carol Bly papers, 1936-2003" at the Elmer L. Andersen Library (University of Minnesota).

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