

The Man With the Moon on a Leash

Ted Kooser, *Winter Morning Walks: 100 Postcards to Jim Harrison*.
Carnegie Mellon University Press, \$12.95 (pbk)

Ironically, the Midwestern American poet Ted Kooser has achieved renown in a bizarre inversion of the common celebrity syndrome: he has become well-known chiefly for being unknown. The subject of a chapter titled "The Anonymity of the Regional Poet" in Dana Gioia's *Can Poetry Matter?* (1992), Kooser has nonetheless managed to enjoy a remarkable amount of success, given his numerous handicaps to recognition in America. Unlike many poets employed as instructors of creative writing in American universities, he has always worked outside of academia (until his recent retirement, as a life insurance executive). And unlike better-known poets employed in life insurance, he has never lived on one of America's coasts, the loci of power and renown in American poetry circles. Instead, he lives on a farm outside a small town in rural Nebraska, a region dismissively identified by those in California and New York as one of the nameless "flyover states". An additional problem is that his work is generally written in a plainspoken, Midwestern dialect which does not demand much exegesis. Rarely employing abstraction beyond a few common rhetorical devices, Kooser's poetry is nonetheless noteworthy: his is a distilled and lyrical free verse which often surprises and pleases by its unexpected associations and revelations.

What Kooser does is document the circumstances and language of the Midwest in straightforward, relatively simple verse. This is not to say that his poetry is simplistic. His best poems are economical in expression, often using multiple variations of personification and anthropomorphism to drive the poem forward, as in "An Empty Shotgun Shell" from his collection, *One World at a Time* (1984):

It's a handsome thing
in its uniform—
all crimson and brass—
standing guard
at the gate to the field,
but something
is wrong at its heart.
It's dark in there,
so dark a whole night
could squeeze in,
could shrink back up in there
like a spider,
a black one
with smoke in its hair.

Though just fourteen lines and only 55 words long, so much happens here that its summary is hardly shorter than the poem itself: Kooser's discarded shotgun shell is like a soldier with a bad heart, an illness which, in turn, is likened unto a darkness into which the night, in the manner of a spider—which is, finally, compared to a person—could crawl inside. With the spider's single anthropomorphic detail of smoke-filled hair, he suggests (but does not tell) a variety of further information about the insect, night, illness, soldier and shell.

In addition to personification and anthropomorphism, he frequently displays a variety of types of metonymy, such as a clever substitution of the symbol for the thing symbolised (for instance, in his most recent volume *Winter Morning Walks*, both the distance and the future are “sealed up in tin like an old barn”). He uses synecdoche sparingly but accurately, and occasionally performs a dizzying metaphoric substitution of author, subject and reader, as in the last, comic lines of “The Urine Specimen”, from *One World at a Time*:

You lift the chalice and toast
the long life of your friend there in the mirror,
who wanly smiles, but does not drink to you.

At his best, the tricks layer and redouble so quickly that the reader nearly loses track of the subject. Witness the stunning inversion of tenor and vehicle in “Etude”, the introductory poem to *Weather Central* (1994).

I have been watching a Great Blue Heron
fish in the cattails, easing ahead
with the stealth of a lover composing a letter,
the hungry words looping and blue
as they coil and uncoil, as they kiss and sting.

Let's say that he holds down an everyday job
in an office. His blue suit blends in.
Long days swim beneath the glass top
of his desk, each one alike. On the lip
of each morning, a bubble trembles.

No one has seen him there, writing a letter
to a woman he loves. His pencil is poised
in the air like the beak of a bird.
He would spear the whole world if he could,
toss it and swallow it live.

There's no need for any explanation of what's going on here. No explanation could make such a poem more pleasing.

It is something of an exaggeration to call Ted Kooser anonymous: three of his books have been published in the high-profile Pitt Poetry Series by the University of Pittsburgh Press, and individual poems have appeared in such major magazines as *The Atlantic* and *The New Yorker*. With his most recent collection, *Winter Morning Walks*, Kooser has changed publishers as well as his approach to writing. That is to say that this 120-page book is much less of an assemblage of disparate poems than many of Kooser's previous collections. Instead, the volume includes one hundred postcard-sized poems which stem from a similar source: the poet's winter walks before sunrise. As Kooser explains (perhaps too revealingly) in his introduction, he had given up poetry upon being diagnosed with cancer in 1998. After receiving radiation treatment, he began making two-mile walks before dawn in order to get his exercise out of the sun. And then, he writes, "one morning in November I surprised myself by trying my hand at a poem". Instead of titles, the poems in *Winter Morning Walks* merely have dates of entry and a brief description of the weather ("Cold and Clear", "Four Below Zero", "Eight Degrees at 6 a.m."), both of which contribute threads of chronology and continuity few collections of American verse ever achieve: as the book

progresses to its final entry of March 20, the reader witnesses the fall and rise of temperature, the arrival and departure of storms and the change from winter to spring, as well as medical check-ups and recovery. The book is a selection of the poems he pasted on postcards and sent to his friend, Jim Harrison, author of *Legends of the Fall*, in imitation of their earlier postcard correspondence in haiku. As a result, all the poems are quite short—the briefest is a couplet, the longest 21 lines—which lends a further thread of continuity, that of composition, to the book.

Given that the poems were written after walks on country roads and in the woods near Kooser's ranch, the natural world occupies much of the frame, often pushing the poet to the role of observed, rather than observer:

Cloudy, dark and windy.

Walking by flashlight
at six in the morning,
my circle of light on the gravel
swinging side to side,
coyote, racoon, field mouse, sparrow,
each watching from darkness
this man with the moon on a leash.

("November 18")

In addition to animals and nature, Kooser continues to catalogue the people and language of the rural Midwest—the land of Airstream trailers and barns, of combines and pickups, of farmers and hunters. Indeed, it is on the subject of hunting that Kooser reveals most clearly his intention in *Winter Morning Walks*: to bear witness.

New snow.

Some hunter, shooting out of season,
maybe last night with a spotlight,
has subtracted a good sized deer
from these woods when nobody else
was around but six inches of snow
to take account of it. There's a track
where he dragged the carcass down

through the trees to a frozen stream
and then over the ice and then up
through the weeds to the county road
where he lifted it into a pickup,
stomped the snow from his boots,
took a pee and lit a smoke,
threw down the match and drove off
thinking that nobody
would ever know the difference.

(“December 7”)

This poem lacks the rhetorical twists of his best work, but it does display an ability to “know the difference”, to observe and chronicle what is seldom seen by other American poets. In writing about his desire to document the life of his region, Kooser has acknowledged his indebtedness to William Carlos Williams’s notion of the local, adding, “My personal tradition is that of the descriptive writer, and I see my job as presenting the world in ways in which it may not have been presented before”.

In writing a book of untitled short poems on a single subject, Kooser is taking a risk rarely present in his earlier works. His dead father—who, ghost-like, appears in several of the poems—speaks to him in the volume’s untitled, undated introductory poem. In it, Kooser is asked, if not challenged, to create something new of his life, his illness and his walks. It is a hazardous task. He fails on the occasions when he loses authorial objectivity and stumbles into sentimentality, self-pity or self-aggrandisement. The preface, in which Kooser briefly describes his treatment and depression, is better left unread. Not only does it pull too hard on the heart-strings, but it declares too much too early. The title provides enough background; the poems reveal, on their own terms and in their own time, the conditions which inspired them.

Additionally, in *Winter Morning Walks* Kooser’s limited rhetorical resources appears to have been further reduced. At times the author relies too heavily on genitive phrases: in four subsequent poems he mentions “the dark hall of the road”, “the cold porcelain knob of the moon”, “the glory of frost”, “the yellow-gray eye of the woods”, “an anthem of geese” and “a thin flag of starlings”. Some of these are interesting, especially the goose anthem, but when the poems are so short—and when the bulk of their impact is cumulative—the overuse of an already-commonplace device

weakens both the poems and, in part, the book itself. That said, the collection is a noteworthy achievement for a poet who deserves greater renown, both in his own country and in the wider anglophone world. Though short even by Kooser's standards, many of this book's individual poems rank among his best.

For some readers, Kooser's writing may seem strangely familiar, as much of his shtick has been approximated by Billy Collins, America's current poet laureate. A New Yorker who teaches creative writing at Lehman College, Collins has turned Kooser-like forms of personification and anthropomorphic metaphor into best-seller status, most notably in *Picnic, Lightning* (1998). For those allergic to Collins's tone, Kooser's poetry may be a pleasant substitute: thankfully, it lacks Collins's wisenheimer irony and self-conscious pose of unruffled urbanity. Instead, Kooser offers a poetry free of affection, filled with unique observations, poetry in which the graceful perceptions of the writer lead the reader, in his words, "back out into the ordinary". The cover of the paperback edition of *Winter Morning Walks* features an oil painting by the author, a startlingly naturalistic depiction of Kooser's beloved Midwestern farmland—further evidence, if any were needed, of his precise and earnest artistic vision.