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The Life & Poetry of Ted Kooser

MARY K. STILLWELL

University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln and London

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Set in Lyon by Laura Wellington.
Designed by Nathan Putens.

Frontispiece: Ted Kooser in his art studio in Dwight, Nebraska. Photo by Matt Valentine.

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For Frank,

for Wil and Anna,

and in memory

of Susan J. Rosowski

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Acknowledgments

As an epigraph for his 2004 collection, *Delights & Shadows*, Ted Kooser chose a line from Emily Dickinson's letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson: "The Sailor cannot see the North—but knows the Needle can." Dickinson was looking for literary guidance from her friend and mentor; Kooser was reminding his readers of how knowledge of death informs our lives. Dickinson's words also suggest the kind of support and guidance, seen and unseen, that I have received as I turned my interest in Kooser's poetry into the book that is before you.

Like that sailor setting forth, I have many to thank for pointing me in the right direction both before and after the announcement of Kooser's laureateship. The late Susan J. Rosowski, scholar and editor of Willa Cather's scholarly edition, a careful listener, provided insight, feedback, and an opportunity for financial support by nominating me for a UNL Presidential Fellowship to complete my doctoral study of Nebraska poetry. Although she was too ill to attend graduation, her friendship continued, and I have felt her presence long after her death several months following Kooser's appointment.

Early in my college career I had the good fortune to study with Sr. Ernestine and Mike Novak at (then) St. Mary College, who praised my early attempts at writing even when my test scores indicated a future in the sciences. Later William Packard, poet, teacher, and

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editor of the *New York Quarterly*, encouraged me to give poetry writing a try in his master class at New York University. He introduced me to the work of Nebraska poet Weldon Kees and those who came after him, including Ted Kooser. Two decades after that first class Packard wrote my recommendation for graduate school. I also owe thanks to Michael Benedikt, who, when he served as poetry editor of the *Paris Review*, published my early poetry and in this way encouraged my writing.

Happily many of those who nurtured me and influenced my work are alive and well. Writing any long work is at times a lonely task, and yet it cannot be accomplished without support and assistance every step of the way. Thanks to the other members of my doctoral committee: in English, Paul Olson, who suggested that I write a book on Kooser's work, and Plains scholar Frances W. Kaye, as well as Nelson Potter, in philosophy, who steered and listened, prompted and were silent in just the right doses. Special thanks go to Susan Naramore Maher, advisor, teacher, and former chair of the English department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, for her encouragement, mentoring, and for including *Weather Central* on her Plains literature syllabus many years ago.

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Various poets and scholars have also provided information or pointed me in its direction; among them are Gregory Fraser, Glenna Luschei, Robert Phillips, Detrich Oostedt, Henry Taylor, Steve Cox, Norbert Krapf, and the late Don Jones, and, closer to home, Greg Kosmicki, publisher of Backwaters Press, Hilda Raz, Bill Kloefkorn, Todd Robbinson, Roy Scheele, Greg Kuzma, Don Welch, Mark Sanders, Lee Lemon, and Mordicai Marcus, along with *ausländer* Steve Hahn. A special thanks goes to Danielle Glazner, my plains literature seminar partner, when I was just launching this leg of my journey at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the Nebraska Foundation for a fellowship that allowed me to reduce my teaching load for a year, particularly important to a lecturer, and to Joy Ritchie and Deborah Minter, then chair and vice chair of the English department, for lending their support. Thanks, too, to my students who read and shared their insights about Kooser's poetry with me over the years.

Fortunate for me, Andrews Hall reverberates with poetry past and present. Not long after I began this book, Ted Kooser dropped by my office on the first floor of Andrews. "You know," he began, "this was Karl Shapiro's office in the 50s, only it was much larger, a suite of offices. *Prairie Schooner* was located here too." He went on to say that my old upholstered chair in the corner, where students sat when they came to visit, was probably his too, the place where "Karl sat to read his mail, . . . where he sat to read *Howl* when it came in the mail, and where he announced to Glenna Luchsi, his grad assistant, 'This will change everything.'" Being able to work in this environment enriched the text and texture of this project.

Kooser's friends have been generous with their time, filling in blanks and providing helpful insights into his life. Among them are Patty Lombardi, Burke Casari, and Mij Laging. Diana Tressler, Kooser's first wife, has become a friend as well as a well-spring of information and encouragement. In addition to providing insights into their lives via interviews and e-mails, she generously passed along Kooser's early letters that tell the story of their courtship and dreams, and that document her former husband's desire for a life

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of poetry. Kooser's sister, Judith Langmack, has also been helpful in affording a look into the house on West Ninth Street where she and her brother grew up.

Since my first query of Ted Kooser in 1997 when I was a master's degree student, he has generously given time and attention, answering questions by e-mail, phone, and in person, first for a seminar paper, later for my dissertation, and then for this work. I am extremely fortunate to have had an opportunity to be among Kooser's first poetry tutorial students at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. I appreciate in particular his personal tour of Guttenberg, Iowa, that included his grandparents' home and the Mississippi River Lookout to which he returned in his imagination when he was being treated for throat cancer. I am also grateful for his assistance in making sure the manuscript was accurate, for filling in the gaps that Ancestry.com could not. He has also graciously allowed me to include his poetry, letters, and photographs in this work. Kathleen Rutledge, Kooser's wife and wordsmith in her own right, has been generous with her time and attention. She has also been helpful in my gaining an understanding of the daily life of the poet and provided insight into their lives together.

Personal thanks go to Kathy O'Connor, who urged me to undertake graduate work and then cheered me on through thick and thin. I appreciate the friendship and continuing support of the Dish Diners, Kathy Rutledge, Lynn Wake, and Anne Whitney, who have helped keep me grounded through the many years of research and writing.

Very special thanks go to my husband, Frank Edler, with whom I set sail, literally and figuratively, on the two-masted *Ventura* in Manhattan Bay many years ago. He has, since our first meeting, offered me new ways to think about new things. His own scholarly work has informed mine in ways that go beyond the conscious acumen of this sailor but are surely present.

My deep thanks also go to my children, Wil and Anna, who have provided their own inspiration along with a good deal of fun. They have accompanied me to more readings and discussions of poetry than any child need ever attend and have entered into the spirit of

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this project as great listeners and companion travelers, whether to Ted Kooser's office in Dwight to climb his maple, to have lunch at Cy's, to tour the grottos behind the Catholic church, or to Garland to investigate the ionic columns of the Germantown bank.

I thank all of you, named and unnamed, who have accompanied me on this journey. With that said, neither Ted Kooser nor anyone mentioned above should be held accountable for any mistakes or red herrings that may have crept or swum into the final product.

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Chronology

Full-length collections and prose works indicated by bold.

APRIL 25, 1939 Theodore John Kooser born in Ames, Iowa

1962 Earns a BS in English education from Iowa State University

1962–1963 Teaches high school in Madrid, Iowa

NOVEMBER 17, 1962 Marries Diana Tressler in a church ceremony

1963 Moves to Lincoln, Nebraska, to pursue full-time graduate study in English with Karl Shapiro at the University of Nebraska

1964 Joins Bankers Life Nebraska

JULY 17, 1967 Son, Jeffrey Charles Kooser, born

1967–PRESENT Founds and operates Windflower Press

1967–1975 Edits and publishes *Salt Creek Reader*

1968 Receives MA from University of Nebraska

NOVEMBER 1969 Ted and Diana Kooser separate

1969 ***Official Entry Blank***

1970 Becomes part-time instructor in creative writing, University of Nebraska

1971 *Grass County*

1973 *Twenty Poems*

1974 ***A Local Habitation & a Name***

1975 *Shooting a Farmhouse/So This Is Nebraska*

1976 *Voyages to the Island Sea*, with Harley Elliott

1976 ***Not Coming to Be Barked at***

1976 National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship

SEPTEMBER 24, 1977 Marries Kathleen Rutledge

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1978 *Old Marriage and New*

1978 ***Hatcher***

1979 *Cottonwood County*, with William Kloefkorn

1980 Edits *The Windflower Home Almanac of Poetry*

1980 ***Sure Signs: New and Selected Poems***

1980–1981 Edits and publishes *Blue Hotel* magazine

1981 Publishes *The Blue Hotel*, volumes 2 and 3: *Seventeen Danish Poets: A Bilingual Anthology of Contemporary Danish Poetry*

1984 National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship

1985 ***One World at a Time***

1986 ***The Blizzard Voices***

1994 ***Weather Central***

1998 *Journey to a Place of Work*

JUNE 1, 1998 Diagnosed with tongue cancer

FALL 1998 "Lights on a Ground of Darkness: An Evocation of a Place and Time"

1999 *Riding with Colonel Carter*

1999 Retires from Lincoln Benefit Life

2000 ***Winter Morning Walks: One Hundred Postcards to Jim Harrison***

2002 ***Local Wonders: Seasons in the Bohemian Alps***

2003 ***Braided Creek: A Conversation in Poetry with Jim Harrison***

2004 ***Delights & Shadows***

2004 August 2004 Named U.S. poet laureate consultant in poetry

2005 ***The Poetry Home Repair Manual***

APRIL 2005 Pulitzer Prize for *Delights & Shadows*

2005 ***Flying at Night: Selected Poems***

2005 ***Writing Brave and Free*** with Steve Cox

2005 ***Lights on a Ground of Darkness***

2005–2006 Second term as poet laureate

2008 ***Valentines***

2009 ***The Poets Guide to the Birds,*** edited with Judith Kitchen

2010 ***Bag in the Wind*** (children's book)

2012 ***House Held Up by Trees*** (children's book)

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THE LIFE AND POETRY OF TED KOOSER

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One

Growing Up in Iowa, 1939–1963

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CHAPTER ONE

Official Entry

The peonies are up, the red sprouts
burning in circles like birthday candles,
for this is the month of my birth . . .
everything ready to burst with living.

—From "Mother"

Vera Deloras Moser Kooser and Theodore Briggs Kooser welcomed their first child into the world at Mary Greeley Hospital in Ames, Iowa, on Tuesday, April 25, 1939. All across town peonies were sending up bright red sprouts along fences and sidewalks, and the tall, well-established elms that would soon provide shelter from the Midwest summer sun were coming into leaf. A few days later the couple paid their hospital bill of $47.38 and carried Theodore John, named for his father and maternal grandfather, a few blocks south to their upstairs apartment across from Bandshell Park on Carroll Avenue.

Not long after the young family moved to the modest white frame house at 109 West Ninth Street where Teddy, or Little Ted, as he was called, grew up. The neighborhood, now part of the Historic Old Town, was already well known to Ted Sr. He had been born in the house to the immediate west, currently occupied by the Mallo

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family; the Mezvinskys lived to the east of the honeysuckle hedge. The area was comfortably middle class, its residents hardworking and optimistic despite the temporary setbacks that life and weather might bring their way. By 1939 the United States was emerging from the Great Depression, and the residents of West Ninth, like their counterparts across the nation, felt the stirrings of prosperity. Ted Sr. was drapery manager of the Tilden Department Store, located at 203 Main Street, where he had met his future wife when she came to work there as a clerk. Vera became a full-time homemaker when they married.

Members of the Kooser family were among the early white settlers of Story County, Iowa. Originally from Württenberg, Germany, Hans Michael Kosser (1717–1774) and Anna Maria Sybilla (1720–?) married in 1748 and a year later packed up their possessions, and set out to the New World on the *Dragon*, sailing from Rotterdam and arriving in Philadelphia October 17. The Kossers (spelled variously as Koser, Kuzer, Koozer, and Kooser) settled in Reading, Pennsylvania.

During the 1840s and 1850s more than 632,000 settlers from the east, primarily from Indiana, New York, and Pennsylvania, poured into Iowa, which was first named a territory and then became the twenty-ninth state of the union in December 1846. These newcomers saw themselves, at least by some accounts, as "children of destiny, called to fulfill the promise of a chosen nation" and therefore "fortified by an irrepressible optimism." Among the new arrivals were Hans and Anna's great-great-grandson George W. Kooser (1834–1896) and his wife, Margaret Elizabeth Boucher (1836–1919), listed with their nine children on the 1860 US Census Story County (Iowa) rolls.

Commerce in the area thrived, and by December 1864, the town of Ames was founded as a railroad stop on the south branch of the Skunk River and its tributary Squaw Creek in the midst of the county's rich farmland. By 1905 the poet's grandparents, Charles F. Kooser (1873–1942) and Grace E. Lang (1876–1948), whose family had moved to Iowa from Illinois, married and lived in Ames at 1023 Clark Street with their two young sons: Herold Lang (b. 1900) and

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Theodore Briggs (b. 1902). A third son, Derral Charles, was born in 1909.

Early on, the Koosers' middle son, named for Theodore Roosevelt, whose campaign train stopped in Ames during his mother's pregnancy, and for his paternal grandfather, discovered an interest in shopkeeping and exhibited a creative flare. The ingenious young boy set up a millinery shop in his grandmother's barn and began collecting old, unwanted hats that he would transform with new ribbons, feathers, and flowers and resell to many of the same customers.

Business in Ames prospered as Theodore grew to adulthood. Montgomery Ward and J. C. Penney opened stores on Main Street providing Ames' residents a wider selection of goods and Tilden's with competition for the shopper's dollar. With the end of World War I came the end of farm subsidies, and land prices, along with production costs, soared. Over half of the state's farmers were forced to mortgage their land and, as a result, lost it during the Great Depression.

Nearly two hundred miles to the east, the large Moser clan, Vera Kooser's family, worked hard throughout the Depression to hang on to their land and scrape a livelihood from the hills and meadows along the Mississippi River in Clayton County, Iowa. Her parents, like their forebears, were thrifty people. The youngest of five children born to John R. Moser (1874–1972) and Elizabeth D. Morarend (1879–1962), Vera (b. 1908) struck out on her own after graduating from Guttenberg High School, joining her sister Mabel (1902–1990) in Iowa City, where she attended the University of Iowa. Two years later Vera moved to Ames, where her older sister, Florence (1899–1966), and her first husband, Calvin Lake, had relocated. Her brother, Alva (1905–1980), known as Elvy, remained at home. The fifth child, Millard Laurel (1904), died in infancy.

Once settled in Ames, Vera enrolled at Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts (now Iowa State University), where she studied French for two years. She also attended classes at the Templeton Business College before taking a job at Tilden's. There

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the shy young woman from Clayton County met the gregarious shopkeeper, Theodore Briggs Kooser. They married October 17, 1937, in Clinton, Iowa, not far from Guttenberg, in the home of her sister and brother-in-law, Mabel and Carl Allen.

Ames celebrated its diamond jubilee the year of Teddy's birth. About one-fifth of the size it is today, the town boasted a population of nearly 13,500—not counting 6,500 college students. The three-day celebration consisted of a maze of concessions and rides at the city park, concerts, old settler get-togethers, a citizenship induction ceremony, a jubilee dance, plus a round of artillery fire, as though to ward off news of Germany's invasion of Poland.

Despite the impact of World War II, Vera and Ted Sr. were able to provide Teddy and his sister, Judith, born in 1942, with a secure home environment. The war did touch their lives, however. Derral C. Kooser, the children's uncle Charlie, was inducted into the army at Camp Dodge (Johnston, Iowa) in 1942. During part of 1944 and 1945, Vera's sister Mabel, with her daughter, Janice, moved into the Kooser home while her husband served in the navy. A total of 882,542 young Iowa men were drafted, and, for the first time, women saw active duty during war. Ted Sr.'s cousin Margaret became a member of the Army Nurse Corps and served in the Pacific. Herold, known to the family as Uncle Tubby, was forty-two at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor and served at home as a civil air patrol observer. Ted Sr., forty, with a wife and a child, was not called up.

"It would eventually be proven that our fifteen thousand citizens had always been safe from Axis Powers," Kooser writes in *Local Wonders.* However, he continues, "we weren't to relax until peace was declared." Despite Iowa's location in the center of North America, many citizens feared attack by the Japanese or at the very least by the subversive work of spies living undercover among them. Capitalism and patriotism mingled, producing "Spotter Cards" sold by the U.S. Playing Card Company, enabling citizens to memorize the silhouettes of enemy and friendly aircraft while playing pitch. Kooser adds, "Though we were never to hear the searing whistles of V-2 rockets or feel the ground-shuddering thumps of

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falling blockbusters or smell any smoke other than that of our own leaf fires on peaceful October evenings, we had been warned that there was always the possibility we might be attacked from the air by long-range German bombers, and we watched the skies, ready to huddle under the basement stairs when we heard the roar of the Luftwaffe and the blitz came hurling down."

His parents and their neighbors, he writes, because they were descended from immigrants, had "learned from their forebears to prepare for the worst. A Nazi air attack was just one of the many horrible things that might happen to a family along the long, hard, Calvinistic trail to life's end." During blackouts, the Kooser family listened for their neighbor, Mr. Posey, like Uncle Tubby, a local civil defense observer, to make his rounds, checking to make sure no light showed below the drawn blinds. They followed the progress of the war in the newspapers and on the radio as the poet recalls in the poem, "Zenith," from *Delights & Shadows*. WOI and WHO radio brought *The Jack Benny Show*, *One Man's Family*, *The Romance of Helen Trent*, along with big band music led by Glenn Miller, Duke Ellington, Tommy Dorsey, and Benny Goodman, into their homes.

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