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# THE "IN BETWEEN"

## LANDSCAPES OF TRANSFORMATION IN TED KOOSER'S WEATHER CENTRAL

MARY K. STILLWELL

### ETUDE

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 speak the whole world if he could,  
toss it and swallow it live.<sup>1</sup>

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"Etude," which launches *Weather Central*, Ted Kooser's most recent full-length collection of poems, is in many ways typical of the poet's work. The poem is what it professes to be: an etude, a study, a preview of all the poems that are to follow. It also defines the major poetic devices or characteristics that will be important throughout the 1994 volume: direct, plain-spoken language; use of interior and exterior landscape(s); and explicit metaphor that particularizes the poet's life.

Many of us who make our home on the plains recognize the Great Blue Heron in the cattails, the bubbles along the water's surface, the blue suit of the everyday job. The poet's guiding metaphor, Great Blue Heron/lover-artist, is one we can appreciate, perhaps even participate in, as the bird eases ahead in our memory as well as on the printed page before us.

That Kooser's poetry is frequently classified as regional comes as no surprise.<sup>2</sup> Critics throughout the poet's career have pointed to his phenomenology of the plains in and around Lincoln, Nebraska, where he has lived since 1963.<sup>3</sup> Kooser's work, according to Peter Stitt, "grows directly out of the life he leads as a more or less average citizen of a more or less



FIG. 1. Ted Kooser. Courtesy of Ted Kooser.

average small city set nearly at the center of the United States.”<sup>4</sup> David Baker, reviewing for *Poetry*, sees *Weather Central* as part of Kooser’s “larger project, the creation in poetry of a distinctly Midwestern social text.”<sup>5</sup>

Born in Ames, Iowa, in 1939, Kooser’s roots are in the Midwest. He received his B.S. in English education from Iowa State University and then moved to the Lincoln area to work on his M.A. in English, which he received from the University of Nebraska in 1968. Although he has taught poetry writing from time to time and has managed his own press for many years, Kooser has earned his living in a nonacademic, nonliterary environment. Only this year has Kooser retired from Lincoln Benefit Life Company, where he was vice president of marketing.<sup>6</sup>

In his close attention to plains life, Kooser can be placed within the tradition of William Carlos Williams. However, Kooser, like Williams before him, suggests that although art is rooted in the local, it need not remain only there. Indeed, Kooser’s preoccupation is with mutuality: both the particular and the universal are among his central poetic concerns. As we shall see, an understanding of the way Kooser makes mutuality manifest is crucial to the explication of his poetry. This in turn will lead us to a fuller appreciation of the scope of Kooser’s work and to a reassessment of his place among contemporary American writers.

#### THE SPACE BETWEEN

Although our discussion here will focus on the poems in *Weather Central*, metaphor and Kooser’s interest in mutuality can be seen as fundamental to much of his earlier work as well. Kooser has been extensively published. His eight full-length collections include *Official Entry Blank* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969); *A Local Habitation and A Name* (San Luis Obispo: Solo Press, 1974); *Not Coming to Be Barked At* (Milwaukee: Pentagram Press, 1976); *Sure Signs: New and Selected Poems* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980); *One World at a Time* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985); *The Blizzard Voices* (St. Paul: Bieler Press, 1986); and *A Book of Things* (Lincoln: Lyra Press, 1995).<sup>7</sup>

The metaphoric form that Kooser employs in “Etude” can be found in a number of poems that comprise *Weather Central*. Tom Hansen, writing in the *North Dakota Review*, describes it as the “three-stanza or tripartite poem which loosely parallels the ABA sonata form.”<sup>8</sup> Heron, as we have seen, becomes lover becomes the heron. What Hansen makes clear is that Kooser “doesn’t merely compare the stalking heron to the letter-writing lover and then turn away from the one, A, to focus on the other, B” (224). The letter-writer, Hansen continues, “still displays qualities that are

heronesque. Derived from A, this B retains vestiges of its original A-ness" (224). In the final stanza, in a similar way, "B leads back into A" (224). In other words, a "clearing" or "space" has been created *between* the lover and heron so that each can participate or share by means of metaphor in the other's essential qualities or being.

Metaphor works because of the space between the thing and that with which it is compared and because of the ability of the thing and that with which it is compared to cross over this space, each to the other. The word "metaphor" comes to English from the Greek *metapherein*, to transfer.<sup>9</sup> Within that space between, or landscape of transformation, one thing is at the same time separate from another and becomes it. Metaphor enables, or forces, the reader to look more closely, to see the thing more clearly, to meditate on identity and difference. It is here in this "in between" that Kooser makes the universal manifest.

In a more abstract manner and in different terms, Martin Heidegger, in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, expresses more fully what the "in between" allows:

In the midst of beings as a whole an open place occurs. There is a clearing, a lighting. Thought of in reference to what is, to beings, this clearing is in a greater degree than are beings. This open center is therefore not surrounded by what is; rather, the lighting center itself encircles all that is, like the Nothing which we scarcely know. . . . Only this clearing grants and guarantees to us humans a passage to those beings that we ourselves are not, and access to the being we ourselves are.<sup>10</sup>

The *auseinandersetzen*, known to German existentialists as the "in between", is where being comes into the world. It is a time-full place, where summer and spring meet and converse, where presence and absence rub shoulders, past and present commiserate, where one

species transforms into another, one sense informs another. It is, according to Kooser, that place Robert Bly describes, where great leaps are made "from the conscious to the unconscious and back again" and transformation occurs.<sup>11</sup> And, as Kooser has pointed out, "the more daring the metaphor, the more resonate and powerful are its effects."<sup>12</sup>

Although Kooser's form is often praised, the particular form and structure he chooses have not been considered as ways of meaning. That the "in between" can be articulated as form and *means* is, in fact, a point Robert Bly stresses. "Rapid association is a form of content," Bly writes in *Leaping Poetry*, and although he is writing about Wallace Stevens, the same can be said of Kooser's work: the content of a poem lies in the "distance between" what is given in the world and what is imagined by the poet. "The farther a poem gets from its initial worldly circumstance without breaking the thread," Bly asserts, "the more content it has" (14).

#### THE ROLE OF THE POET

Kooser immediately establishes the role of the poet as seer, as one who makes meaning, in *Weather Central*. In "Etude," the reader is introduced to the poet meditating on the heron in a manner that suggests biblical creation, the Maker meditating on his new world, and a point of view not unlike Ralph Waldo Emerson's. Through metaphor, as we have seen, heron then becomes the lover composing the letter (3). The words are the hungry words of the lover but they continue to include the hunger of the heron for fish. The searching movements of the heron, "coil and uncoil," are writing movements.

In the shift to the second stanza, the heron more boldly asserts human dimension. Kooser moves further into this transformative space with the ease of his heron in water. By using the colloquial "Let's say," rapid though the association may be, mutuality is accepted with ease (6). The heron is now the blue-suited

office worker, preparing the way for the reader to accept the "long days," in line 8, as fish. The glass top of the desk also exists as water's surface where bubbles tremble (8-10).

In lines 11 and 12, the poet meditates on the lover (recently heron) with whom he is conflated—all three lead solitary lives, all three are concerned with "hungry words"—from a perspective close to that of his initial position, the "I" of line 1. Kooser, in describing the office worker with "His pencil is poised / in the air like the beak of a bird," suggests that Genesis-like moment when the poet stands "On the lip / of each morning" ready to begin his attempt to create order from the apparent chaos of daily life (12-15).

By poem's end, poet and lover participate in the motion and action of the heron. Within the act of writing, the poet grasps for the poem (meaning in the world), the lover reaches for his love, and the heron spears the fish he was looking for in stanza one. At this moment, the hungry heron/lover/poet is engaged in a sort of creative ecstasy. "Etude," from this perspective, describes the artistic discipline, and the reader in the reading of the poem participates in the creative act itself.

In the seven sections of *Weather Central* that follow (again, echoes of Genesis), the poet's world—the microcosm and macrocosm—is revealed as he creates and interacts with the landscape around and within him. The metaphors and images in one poem often provide foundation stones for those following. When the heron shows up again in "The Poetry Reading," in section 2, for example, he carries with him to the podium all the qualities of A and B—if we continue to use Hansen's analogy—lover, letter-writer, poet, heron easing ahead through the water found in "Etude"—providing added poignancy and pathos to the short poem (35).

We know, by the poem's title, just where we are and what we are witnessing. The poet/heron has caught the fish he was stalking once when he was young in "Etude." By the second stanza, however, the poet is all too aware of

nature's (and his own) transience and he articulates his own aging in heronesque terms—"gray neck," "yellow eye," for example. The tilt of the poet's head over the page, the book open "on its spine, a split fish," for the benefit of the good eye recalls the heron's familiar head movement as it searches the cattails (35).

The space between one human being and another, between human being and other creatures, nature, and inanimate objects, is frequently mediated in Kooser's poems. The "in between" foregrounds relationship and provides a place for the exchange of and participation in the various characteristics of one with other. This is Kooser's text, sacred if you will, by which he reads himself, his life, his history.

In "An Epiphany," for example, Kooser subtly juxtaposes the worlds of the Brown Recluse Spider and Kooser's wife, bringing them closer and closer until they seem to collapse and merge.

... The hair was my wife's,  
long and dark, a few loose strands, a curl  
she might idly have turned on a finger,  
she might idly have twisted, speaking to  
me,  
and the legs of the beetle were broken. (67)

Bly, writing about what he terms "wild association," might well be writing about "An Epiphany" when he suggests that "powerful feeling makes the mind associate faster, and evidently the presence of swift association makes the emotions still more alive; it increases the adrenalin flow."<sup>13</sup> The association of the "she" of the spider and the "she" of the wife intensifies quickly, dramatically heightening the poem's emotional impact—precipitated by the danger and vulnerability of which the poet becomes suddenly aware.

We see the mutuality found in the metaphor intensified by Kooser time and time again in poems such as "Ditchburning in February," "For Jeff," "In Passing," and "Old Dog in March," to name only a few.

## MUTUALITY: POET AND READER

No less important to the effectiveness of the poems that comprise *Weather Central* is the distance that Kooser is able to bridge, to cross, perhaps to close, between himself (his persona) and the reader. Kooser accomplishes this crossing or mediation, another kind of leap, in three distinct, often interrelated, ways: first, by his use of distinct, recognizable sensual detail; second, by his portrayal of his poetic persona as familiar; and third, by the ways he employs direct address of the reader to form relationship.

Kooser brings the reader to experience the apparent subject matter through the use of rich and evocative detail for which his work is so well known. Kooser is, to quote David Baker, "a devoted chronicler of the Midwest, but so careful, so meticulous, that even his most modest poems ring with pleasing recognitions" (34).

"In Late Spring," for example, rings with rich, evocative description beginning with the flight of an F-4 jet fighter as it crosses the line of vision.

One of the National Guard's F-4 jet fighters,  
making a long approach to the Lincoln air-  
field,  
comes howling in over the treetops, its shadow  
flapping along behind it like the skin of a  
sheep,  
setting the coyotes crying back in the woods,  
and then the dogs, and then there is a sudden  
quiet (7).

The visual depiction, detailed in line 2 as the F-4 is making "a long approach," includes the plane's rate of speed and its angle of descent. By line 3, the reader hears the sound of the jet "howling in over the treetops." Once Kooser has introduced the reader to physical qualities of the image, he amplifies and colors our knowledge of it through the use of metaphor and simile.

As Kooser begins his description of the jet, its howl, the poet is already looking ahead to

coyotes and dogs. The jet's shadow, "like the skin of a sheep," suggests an undercurrent of violence as soon as Kooser places it in the close proximity of coyotes and dogs. Through the use of interrelated senses and metaphor, Kooser, working like a sorcerer, invites us into the text of the poem.

Kooser does not rely on sight alone for graphic detailing of place, event, or person. "In Late Spring" is vivid to the reader because Kooser appeals to the other senses as well in his descriptions. Energized sound—"howling," "crying," and "flapping"—in the early lines of the poem give way to the "ring" of quiet which joins that of the empty pan. The Russian Olives "sigh" and Kooser, engaging in a pun, joins his own subvocal reading to "bee-song."

Description is tactile as well: "perfect porcelain bells," bald-headed peonies, the wet pan is wiped dry. The mutuality of simile and personification underscore the familiarity of detail: ferns have "shy ears," the horsefly "twirls his mustache" and brushes dust from his sleeves, the tulip wears lipstick, spring dashes by on her "run-down broken toe shoes."

Kooser also uses his persona effectively to engage the reader rather than to set himself apart, an egocentrism that could stress or even shatter the poet-reader relationship as well as the meaning of the poem as a whole. By carefully choosing the precise moment of his own introduction into the poem, Kooser often forges alliances with the reader that suggest intimacy or complicity. The fourth stanza begins:

I have been reading for hours, or intending  
to read,  
but over the bee-song of the book I could  
faintly hear  
my neighbor up the road a quarter mile  
calling out to his daughter, and hear her  
calling back,  
not in words but in musical notes . . . (7)

This builds on the relationship that the poet has already established with his phenomenological precision and involvement. The reader

is committed to a journey with the "I" before the formal introduction occurs.

This journey, established here in the initial poem of section 1 of the collection, will continue throughout *Weather Central*. When the speaker of "In Late Spring" announces that "the world knows my place and stands and holds a chair / for me," the reader is poised to listen to what the balance of the collection has to say about that world (25-26). In learning about Kooser's world, we learn about the one we share with him.

Once again, Kooser has drawn the reader into the "in between" with him. When the poet announces "I have forgotten my place in the world," the reader, similarly engaged by the rich and evocative physical world that has been being described, recognizes the feeling. And, in fact, it is a feeling the reader never entirely shakes as the poem moves to conclusion. The world knows our place, too, and reveals itself to us as it does to Kooser. We continue our journey with Kooser as he enters the mutual space shared between him and the horsefly. Our connection, as reader, to other, to the natural world; is intimate. When Kooser participates with the horsefly in the twirling of his mustache, we, in a sense, twirl our own. We, too, brush the pollen from our sleeves.

Kooser also uses direct address, often with the pronouns "you" and/or "your," in such a way as to invite the reader into the poem and sometimes to fuse speaker with reader. Take "A Heart of Gold," for example, one of Kooser's widely-anthologized shorter poems that opens:

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. (21)

Once again, through detail, Kooser makes what he sees so vivid that it is as though the reader is looking at, picking up, and peeling the label from the beer bottle. The reader

knows that old familiar bottle beside the road so well that she is not surprised when Kooser refers to it in line 9 (more than halfway through the poem) as "your." The writer and reader are joined in such a way as to suggest that the experience of one is that of the other, what is true for one holds true for the other.

In "Snakeskin," though the "you" is introduced early on in the poem, the rhythm of the poem, echoing the sound of the poem's primary metaphor, that of the train, assists in drawing the reader into the motion of the poem, into travel with the writer into the adventure of the future (WC, 11). Kooser frequently employs "us" to similar effect. "Let us leave our scene / there," he whispers deep into "Oceans of Fun" (WC, 22, 16-17). While leaving a family in their own moment, enjoying the water slide at a local theme park, we (poet and reader) are called to examine our own vulnerable position on a planet that is hurling "more than a thousand miles an hour" (24).

#### LIFE IN THE MIDLANDS

The geographic "in between," intimately associated with the historical, as well as the personal, also provides a place and space for transformation to occur—not only within the poem but also within the reader's understanding of her/his own life. Whether alongside the road, as in "A Heart of Gold," or at his desk in Garland, Nebraska, Kooser has involved the reader in the geography of being in the world (*Dasein* to the existentialists). The titles of many of the poems of the early part of the collection provide a geographical and historical triptych: "City Limits," "Lincoln, Nebraska," "Site," "A Statue of the Unknown Soldier," and "The Gilbert Stuart Portrait of Washington."

As Yi-Fu Tuan has observed, "Place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the others."<sup>14</sup> Kooser uses the security of a well-articulated place to allow for a flight into the unknown of the future. In other words, by the poet's close detailing of

location, Kooser makes it knowable. The reader feels safe, safe enough to free herself from her own identity enough so that she might follow the writer into unknown territory, into the other, into new ways of thinking and of seeing the world.

This place/space called "in-between," "clearing," and so forth, is, as already noted, time-ful. While father is caught mid-slide in "Worlds of Fun," anchoring us *there* at that frozen moment, we can dare to look, and leap, elsewhere, to literally and figuratively view time in the movement of our planet.

#### TIME AND THE BETWEEN

The river of time comes to surface from time to time throughout the collection from its more mythic beginnings in "Etudes" through to the weather report at precisely six fifteen. Temporal and mythic time, in some ways the "stuff of transformation" in many Kooser poems, are profoundly interrelated. The poet's father with his broom, in "The Sweeper," can be read as both literal as archetypal as the father/gondola paddler moves along the river of his/all life/Life (WC, 84).

The circle of life, both in human terms and in the seasonal imagery, occur and reoccur throughout *Weather Central*. Past and present and future merge, separate, and join again in "For Jess" (WC, 78). Considerations of time and mortality become more insistent in sections 4, 5, and 6 when we meet the people significant to Kooser's life. But perhaps nowhere is the theme of time more clearly or directly stated by Kooser than in "An Abandoned Stone Schoolhouse in the Nebraska Sandhills," which stands at the midpoint of the collection.

Time, in Kooser's hands, is a not at all an abstract concept, which is perhaps why literary critics have often overlooked the "ideas" or "intellectual constructs" in the poet's work. Touch the wall," Kooser invites, "and a hundred thousand years brush away, "just like that" (9, 10, 11). Substance transforms within the poem: stone encompasses water, is time.

Not only is our time here limited, our voices, even the poet's voice, will soon fade, finally disappear altogether.

"The poem 'Surveyors' also addresses temporal and mythic time, don't you think?" Kooser asks.<sup>15</sup> The question is, of course, rhetorical.

#### SURVEYORS

They have come from the past,  
wearing their orange doublets  
like medieval pages.

Seeing through time, they see  
nothing of us. For them  
the world is rock upon rock.

There is always the one  
on one side of the highway,  
holding his yellow staff,

and one on the other,  
his one eye boring through  
cars and trucks. It is as if

we were all invisible,  
streaming between them  
like ghosts, not snapping

the tightened string of light  
they hold between them, not  
catching it across the bumper  
and dragging them bouncing  
behind us into our lives.

We mean nothing to them

in our waxed sedans, in our  
business suits and fresh spring  
dresses. They stand by the road

in the leaning grass, lifting  
their heavy gloves of gold  
to wave across the traffic,

and though they cannot see us,  
helpfully we wave back. (49-50)



The workers themselves, the men doing the surveying (looking onto the contemporary highway before them), "have come from the past," the reader is advised in line 1. Further, in the two following lines, they are described as wearing "doublets," albeit orange ones, "like medieval pages." These workers, we are told, are "seeing through time." In some senses, these workmen are mythic, archetypal, hardly ordinary men at all. At the same time, however, Kooser suggests they are ubiquitous.

The cyclopes on the highway before us, poet and reader alike, exhibit powers that even Kryptonite cannot stop. At the same time they do not seem to be able to see mere mortals: "We were all invisible." We want their attention as though they were gods—"we helpfully wave back"—even as we know "they cannot see us." It is not surprising that Kooser, who has made his career in life insurance, should write so movingly about the seen and unseen, the mortal and the immortal, ghosts and mythic beings each of whom seems to change places several times during the course of the poem.

Frederico Garcia Lorca's essay, "Theory of Function of Duende," described by Bly in *Leaping Poetry*, comes to mind (28-30). Bly writes that "Duende involves a kind of elation when death is present in the room, it is associated with 'dark' sounds, and when a poet has duende inside him, he brushes past death with each step, and in that presence associates fast" (29). When Kooser drives by death out surveying life, we shudder along with him, hurry on by, and wave back, grateful that it is not our time to be pulled aside.

#### KOOSER'S MIDCONTINENT WEATHER REPORT

"Weather Central," grounded in both temporal and mythic time, ends the collection in a way parallel to "Etude," the poem from which the series evolved. From the chaos of the beginning, an order, subsequently written by the poet's hand poised midair in "Etudes," we have

arrived at a map, designed, above all else, to proffer at least momentary order.

#### WEATHER CENTRAL

Each evening at six-fifteen, the weatherman  
turns a shoulder to us, extends his hand,  
and talking softly as a groom, cautiously  
smooths and strokes the massive, dappled  
flank  
of the continent, touching the cloudy whorls  
that drift like galaxies across the hide,  
tracing the loops of harness with their barbs  
and bells and penants; then, with a horsefly's  
touch,  
he brushes a mountain range and sets a  
shudder  
running just under the skin. His bearing  
is cavalier from years of success and he laughs  
at the science, yet makes no sudden moves  
that might startle that splendid order  
or loosen the physics. One would not want to  
wake  
the enormous Appaloosa mare of weather,  
asleep in her stall on a peaceful moonlit night.  
(87)

The time is as precise and as regular as clockwork when the weatherman takes his place, midcountry, at "six-fifteen" on the TV screen. He is, for the moment, in control, though he is cautious enough. The poet's ability to order and fix, it is suggested, is as precarious as the weatherman's ability to map and present weather conditions. What both do, through a variety of meaningful signs and symbols, is to show the reader/viewer how things look to be at this moment. Projections and predictions here on the plains, despite Doppler, are risky business.

So sensitive is the object—horse, weatherman, life itself—that "with a horsefly's touch / he [weatherman literally but also poet] brushes a mountain range and sets a shudder / running just under the skin" (8-10).

Once again, through the use of the familiar (And what could be more mundane and rec-

ognizable than the evening weather report?), Kooser leads the reader into the mysterious, into the "in between," that place we can look at for some short period of time, say from six-fifteen to six-twenty at the very least, in order to obtain a fresh perspective on our lives and on life in general. Despite its fragility, it is a powerful perspective, one that connects us to our world and to all time.

Jeannie Thompson writes that with the Appaloosa mare of weather that closes the poem and the collection, Kooser is "cautious of this powerful creature" and that he suggests that we "Do not disturb, go on with your life."<sup>16</sup> David Baker sees this poem, along with others, as "splendid poems" that should find their way into "representative anthologies," because Kooser is able to document "the dignities, habits, and small griefs of daily life, our hunger for connection, our struggle to find balance in natural and unnaturally-human worlds" (36). While this documentation is no small feat, Baker's statement, and Thompson's, too, draw attention away from what is uniquely and profoundly Kooser.

What the poet offers in this final poem—and throughout the collection that bears its name—is, I believe, both landscape and possibility. Mutuality—and the *auseinandersetzen*, "seem," "clearing," whatever that it affords—provides the means of transcending the confines of our own skins, our own section of the continent, our own continent, to make a leap for ourselves beyond past, present, and future into the dead center of the richness of life. This is Kooser's gift to readers no matter where they live.

#### NOTES

1. Ted Kooser, *Weather Central* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994), p. 3. All poems and excerpts reprinted with permission of publisher. Subsequent citations appear in parentheses in the text, along with line designation, if necessary.

2. In addition to the works quoted within this text, several others are particularly noteworthy in their treatment of Kooser's work. They include



FIG. 2. Original sketch and autograph by Ted Kooser on title page of author's copy of *Weather Central*. Reproduced with permission of Ted Kooser.

Gilbert Allen, "Measuring the Mainstream—A Review Essay," *Southern Humanities Review* 17 (1983): 171-78; Dana Gioia, "Explaining Ted Kooser," *Can Poetry Matter: Essays on Poetry and American Culture* (St. Paul, Minn.: Graywolf, 1992), pp. 92-112; Jean H. Johnson, "Two Visions," review of *Weather Central*, by Ted Kooser, and *The October Palace*, by Jane Hirshfield, *Poet Lore* 90 (1995): 52-55; and James R. Saucerman, "Poems of Popular Common Ground: Four Voices of the Midwest," *Midwest Miscellany* 22 (1994): 9-17.

3. Matthew C. Brennan, "Ted Kooser," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 105 (Detroit: Gale, 1991), p. 144. Subsequent citations appear in parentheses in the text. Unless otherwise noted, biographical data comes from this source.

4. Peter Stitt, "The World at Hand," *The Georgia Review* 34 (fall 1980): 662. Subsequent citations appear in parentheses in the text.

5. David Baker, "On Restraint," *Poetry* 168, no.1 (1996): 34. Subsequent citations appear in parentheses in the text.

6. Ted Kooser, letter to author, 18 November 1998.

7. Kooser's chapbooks and special collections include *Grass Country* (privately printed, 1971); *Twenty Poems* (Crete, Nebr.: Best Cellar Press, 1973); *Shooting a Farmhouse / So This is Nebraska* (St. Paul, Minn.: Ally Press, 1975); *Voyages to the Island Sea*, with Harley Elliott (LaCrosse, Wisc.:

Center for Contemporary Poetry, 1976); *Old Marriage and New* (Austin: Cold Mountain Press, 1978); *Cottonwood Country*, with William Kloefkorn (Lincoln: Windflower Press, 1979); *Etudes* (Cleveland, Ohio: Bits Press, Case Western Reserve University, 1992); and *A Decade of Ted Kooser: Valentines* (Omaha: Penumbra Press, 1996).

8. Tom Hansen, review of *Etudes*, by Ted Kooser, *North Dakota Review* 62, no. 3 (1993): 224, hereafter cited in parentheses in the text.

9. *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 9th ed., s.v. "metaphor."

10. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 53.

11. Ted Kooser, letter to author, 22 November 1997. Robert Bly, *Leaping Poetry: An Idea with Poems and Translations* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), p. 2; hereafter cited in parentheses in the text.

12. Ted Kooser, letter to author, 31 December 1997.

13. *Leaping Poetry* (see note 11 above), p. 8.

14. Tuan, Yi-Fu, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), p. 3.

15. Kooser, letter to author, 22 November 1997.

16. Jeanie Thompson, review of *Weather Central*, by Ted Kooser, *Southern Humanities Review* 30 (1996): 407.