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The Wheeling Year

Ted Kooser

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THE WHEELING YEAR

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THE WHEELING YEAR

A Poet's Field Book | TED KOOSER

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS | LINCOLN & LONDON

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One day tells its tale to another

PSALM 19

PREFACE

I've always been covetous of my friend Keith Jacobshagen's journals. Keith is a fine landscape painter, and for more than thirty years he's been filling hardbound orange engineer's field books with drawings, watercolor sketches, and observations. I know from years of experience that keeping a journal is like taking good care of one's heart. Keith's journals are good medicine. They're beautiful, they're priceless, and I hope that some museum eventually has the good sense to acquire the entire collection. Young artists, young musicians, young writers, and museumgoers both young and old would find them inspirations, just as I have.

But instead of being jealous of the record that Keith's made of his life, I've put together my own little field book, in which I've included sketches and landscape studies made out of words, and thrown in a few observations about life. Keeping the original for myself, of course, I now offer a copy to you.

THE WHEELING YEAR

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JANUARY

It's New Year's Day, and the future backs up, beeping with cheer, and closes its iron maw on the past. And then, with its massive hydraulics, it crushes the last year, mashing all the days together. Then it lumbers away, groaning and leaking, the scraps of the good times flapping farewell from the edges.

That flat snap of a stick match popping to flame on a cast iron stove lid, the first sound of the morning, and then the whoosh of the draft in the pipe, well, that's one of the most important noises of the past two hundred years, more so than the sweet peal of any victory bell, or the words of the greatest leader, and when you are lying in bed in the predawn darkness, fearing the future, that's the sound I recommend you listen for.

But why must I put on this old body day after day, sitting on the side of the bed, pulling on one leg and then the other, tucking the cuffs into my feet, pulling the top over my skull and then trying to smooth out the wrinkles? I'm an old fellow now, have paid off the mortgage and have a little money in the bank. I ought to be able to treat myself to a new body every few years, getting a tax receipt when I turn in the old one at the second-hand store.

Part of my morning ritual is to put on my shoes without sitting down, and by this demonstrating to myself that I am not so old

as to topple over into a steaming heap when trying to balance on one leg. I even tie them that way, shoe in the air, wobbling on one leg and then the other, making a point of it.

Such pleasure there is in the simple, though, such as fitting the ball of my thumb into the bowl of a spoon, and the smooth bowl warming to my touch. Can it be that I have discovered that the first spoon was formed by a thumb? And to hold it like this, with the bowl between finger and thumb, its handle trembling just a little in my fingers, standing in my flannel nightshirt the first thing in the morning, how lovely it is.

If there's some one thing to live for, how can we choose just one among so many? Take, for example, this ordinary kitchen chair, nineteen pieces of wood, fifteen of them—the spindles and legs—turned on a lathe, the seat sawn from a plank and shaped with a scraper, some of the pieces drilled, all of them sanded, fitted together, adjusted, clamped, and glued, a good week's work for someone fifty years ago, the dust of that workshop long since settled onto the cobwebs, the cobwebs swept away, the broom worn down and gone. Five bucks at a yard sale. Any god would be happy to be given just one good chair like this, upon which the light of hundreds of mornings has rested like grace itself, but how long has it stood there next to the kitchen table, turning first one way and then another, waiting for someone to take a moment's notice?

One of my mother's Moser uncles had raised, from a seed, in a copper laundry boiler, a little lemon tree that as it had grown had twisted this way and that, trying to escape those bone-cold Iowa winters, though it stood in the warmest spot, a parlor window to

the south, and was now and then turned so each little leaf got a taste of the sun.

Each summer it bore a handful of rock-hard, acorn-sized lemons, and her aunt would make one pie, lathered with sweet meringue to overpower that poor tree's sour reluctance, and all the relatives would be invited to their house to taste a little slice of miracle.

And, hey, now comes another day, towed by a pickup with yellow caution lights and a big WIDE LOAD banner on its bumper, a vague shape lumbering forward, wrapped in plastic. Perhaps it's only a morning on its way to where an afternoon can be rolled up by its side and bolted on. Who knows how many pieces of this life are up ahead crowding the road? Watch out. Pull over a little.

Everywhere at this moment women are cupping their hands the way this teenage girl at the bus stop cups hers, striking a match to light a cigarette as if dipping a portion of light from the wind, then swiftly lifting the glow to her lips though it leaks through her stubby fingers and wets her sharp chin. She tastes it, she swishes it around in her mouth, she rinses her teeth with the smoke. And she closes her eyes just as those other women are closing theirs and draws the red light into her breast and holds it there, burning with pleasure, while with one hand, which in her mind is now tapered, lovely and sophisticated, she shakes the last drop of fire from the end of the match.

How many moons have I been too busy to notice? Full moons, half moons, quarter moons facing those thousands of suns, watching them bringing the years up, one piece at a time. Even the dark phases of moon after moon, gray stoppers plugged into a starry

sky, letting a little light leak out around the edges. By my reckoning, almost a thousand full moons have passed above me now, and I have been too busy and self-absorbed to be thankful for more than a few, though month after month they have patiently laid out my shadow, that velvety cloak that in the moonlit evenings waits for me.

As, in the dented spaceship of my seventies (shaking a little and leaking water), I travel the endless reaches of my ignorance, all of the books I haven't read, and never will, come rolling at me out of the dark like a hail of asteroids. And now and then an entire library, with a glowing trail of checkout slips, just misses hitting me by inches. On board I carry what I know, a few thin volumes, mostly how-to books, survival guides, and, for my ancient ship, a manual of parts with no address to use in ordering. Oh, yes, and a handful of things I wrote myself, stuffed into the cracks around my window, open onto time.

Thrust through the frozen mud, these mussel shells at the edge of the lake look like the shoulders of men on some workaday errand, wearing black overcoats with patches through which white lining shows.

Where were they going that day, hunched into the wind of water, when by mistake they turned a corner into the wrong street, not even given so much as a last look back?

Kick one loose and toe it over, and you'll see that the body is gone, having been lifted away, perhaps on snowy wings, leaving a shining, immaculate brightness.

The path through any night is narrow, like walking a shining rail, and the stars are a cold wind in your face. Stop anywhere and wait

a moment, and you'll feel the universe slip past, a cloud of black leaves blown in the other direction.

A single starless winter night can seem to last a century or longer, and while we sleep, some great movement like Zoroastrianism—ponderous, foggy, but quick to catch on—may rise from conjecture, flourish, fall out of fashion, and pass. Wherever we look when we waken, we see the hoar frost, white, crystallized salts from the vast tide of its theses.

In awe and in utter ignorance we walk the cold, glittering path through the garden, finding a few leaves scattered before us, the curled shreds of mysterious scrolls. While we slept, each twig, each blade of grass was touched by an age we know nothing about. Stepping lightly, we pass beneath the ancient alabaster columns of trees that hold up nothing now but time.

Not every day of the new year's calendar is an empty box waiting for fortune to fill it. A few come seeded with promise, like "Partial Eclipse," but the rest of each month stands open, a sectioned paper carton like those for Christmas ornaments, now empty. In the old year's calendar, soon to be thrown away, a few splinters of glass lie in the carton's bottom (once bright ideas), and the rusting, bent hooks of old habits.

After many years, two old friends came visiting with gifts, small packages of stories wrapped in the crumpled tissue of age, purchased with tears in our distant past.

I wadded the wrapping and tossed it aside, then held each story to the light, a perfect miniature of something gone, and we laughed, and wept with laughter, the three of us together, as if no time had passed, no time at all.

And just when I remembered a wonderful story I wanted to tell, I looked around, and my friends were putting on the overcoats of age and stepping back into the past, and some of their stories were already misplaced amidst the busy clutter of the present.

And another of my friends has gone, a woman I loved, borne on a gurney into the past, trailing a comet's tail of tubes and instruments, all of us swept up in her orbit, then falling behind, tumbling through space, reaching for something to cling to, watching the past, a vast, glittering galaxy, drifting away.

In the long, low, ivory shafts of January light, a crow, alone on the melting ice of the river, follows its shadow, pecking at it, drinking it in.