

Poet in Profile: Ted Kooser

By Amy Haddad, PhD, MFA, RN



Photo of Ted Kooser. Image courtesy of Blue Flower Arts. <https://blueflowerarts.com/artist/ted-kooser/>

Ted Kooser is a prolific poet, devoted to engaging a broad audience for poetry through his own creative work and the weekly newspaper column he edited, *American Life in Poetry*. The column was carried in more than 150 newspapers. Ted Kooser was named the United States Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry in 2004 and was reappointed in 2005. He lives on an acreage 3 miles outside the village of Garland, Nebraska—not far from Omaha, where I reside. His poetry collections and non-fiction often include finely-crafted observations about his home state, the landscape, and the people who reside there.¹ Over the past several years, I have enjoyed hearing him read his work at public events, have visited with him and his wife Kathleen over dinner at the home of mutual friends, and have corresponded with him. We share an interest in writing creatively about personal illness, as both of us lived through diagnosis and treatment of cancer. His illness and recovery led to a poetry collection that is a departure from themes that generally are the focus of his work.

While he was recovering from surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation for tongue and neck cancer in 1998, Kooser began daily two-mile walks before dawn to avoid the harmful effects of the sun on his sensitive skin. In November, he started to write short poems during and after his walks. Eventually, as he explains in

the preface, he posted his poems to his friend and fellow writer, Jim Harrison. This exchange resulted in the publication in 2000 of *Winter Morning Walks: 100 Postcards to Jim Harrison*, Carnegie Mellon University Press, Pittsburgh, PA. The poems in this collection speak to human frailty and resilience whether the cause is illness, injury, or aging.

The poems are necessarily short because they had to fit on a postcard. Thus, the length of the poems—the longest is 21 lines—may be more inviting for those not naturally drawn to poetry. Kooser packs a lot into the poems in this collection. Each is titled with the date and a brief weather report. The timing of the walks before dawn is important. Dawn symbolizes the gift of another day and provides the certainty of the sunrise. These walks provided an opportunity for reflection and observation. The reader can almost hear the crunch of the frozen ground in the stillness of the winter air.

The direct references to his illness, treatment, and recovery are present among these hundred poems, but few. The poem **november 28**, gives us a glimpse into life before and after a serious diagnosis like cancer. The poem is also a fine example of the opposition in many of the poems in the collection between past and present.

november 28

Chilly and clear.

There was a time

when my long gray cashmere topcoat

was cigarette smoke,

and my snappy felt homburg

was alcohol,

and the paisley silk scarf at my neck,

with its fringed end

tossed carelessly over my shoulder,

was laughter rich with irony.

Look at me now.

There are no similes here, but three striking metaphors about the window-dressing of the man he was before illness, a man who wore luxurious cashmere, a stylish hat and silk scarfs. The undertone, though, is darker. There was also cigarette smoke, alcohol and ironic laughter, all risky habits that lead us to the powerful last line. The poem holds fondness for the person he was now changed by illness and the transformative side-effects of treatment. Perhaps there is a hint of regret about his choices in life prior to his illness.

The tension between life and death and the human and natural world's response to death are evident in this next poem, **january 29**. Although there are 13 lines, the poem is just one sentence. Notice where the poet chooses to break the line, and the effect it has on your reading and expectations of what is to follow.

january 29

The blue moon. Windy.

In a rutted black field by the road,

maybe a dozen bulldozed hedge trees

have been stacked for burning----
 some farmer wanting a little more room
 for his crops----but the trees
 are resisting, arching their spines
 and flexing their springy branches
 against settling so easily
 into their ashes, into the earth,
 so that there is a good deal more wind
 in the pile than wood, more tree
 than fallen tree, and the sparrows
 fly in and out, still singing.

The land on a farm is precious. We know this because of the “black field” and the comment about the farmer wanting more space for crops. It is likely that the trees were planted as a boundary at one time, but now they have served their purpose. Hedge trees are expendable; that is the way of farming. The trees resist death in their own treelike way, different than that of humans. Trees do not “rage against the dying of the light” as in the famous poem by Dylan Thomas.² They arch their spines and flex their springy branches. The double meaning of “springy” here is a masterful touch. One word makes us think of the season and new birth and at the same time we almost see the lighthearted movement of branches that the wind has animated in the now dead trees. The birds too take no notice of the position of the uprooted trees but continue to bring their own life and song to the trees as they always do.

The final poem I selected from this collection is

another example of how much meaning can be contained in so few words.

february 24

Twenty-seven degrees and clear.

In the yard of the empty Walker place
 the storm cellar roof has fallen in,
 and the cut stone steps that once led down
 to safety now lead to a wall of sod
 and rubble. But in memory, the safe places
 never fall into themselves. They remain
 warmly lit by a lantern. Burlap bags
 always full of potatoes, damp wooden shelves
 jeweled with jars of preserves.

The specific details such as the “Walker place” create a complete image of an abandoned farmhouse—but not just any farmhouse, as this one belonged to a neighbor. The poem describes the certainty of decay and decline in nature because of the elements and neglect. It is a small step to consider that the same decline is often a part of the aging process or the result of a life-altering injury or illness. The poem might continue with a sad list of losses, but it does not. The poem turns in the fifth line with the phrase, “But in memory, the safe places/never fall into themselves.” The poem shifts to the light, the safe, familiar places of memory, and the comforting images of warmth and plenty. The poet literally takes us down into the earth. He isn’t afraid of the dark. He acknowledges death but points us to what

is good in life and the beauty that is “preserved” there like the fruit. This level of complexity is very difficult to achieve in nine lines, but not unusual in this lovely collection where a sense of harmony or balance between the light and dark is evident throughout.

In personal correspondence with me, Ted Kooser had this to say about how writing impacted his recovery:

“Cancer is (as you well know) chaos, and it was essential for me to be able to find some sort of order in suffering through it. The poems were that. I was, out of chaos, putting together a little rectangle of words, trying to choose the very best work, the very best diction, the very best imagery, so as to be able to produce just a small bit of order.”³

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References

1. Kooser T. *Local Wonders; Seasons in the Bohemian Alps*. University of Nebraska Press, 2002.
2. Thomas D. Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night. In: *The Poems of Dylan Thomas*. New Direction Publishing Corporation; 2017.
3. Personal correspondence from Ted Kooser to Amy Haddad, March 19, 2019.

Additional Resources

www.tedkooser.net

Literary Biography: Stillwell M. *The Poetry and Life of Ted Kooser*. University of Nebraska Press; 2013.

Compilation of Interviews, Critical Comments, and Literary Reminiscences. In: Sanders M (ed.) *The Weight of the Weather: Regarding the Poetry of Ted Kooser*. Stephen F. Austin University Press; 2017.

The Nebraska Project; Bill Frakes. Video. [Passing Through: Ted Kooser](#).

Kooser T. *The Poetry Home Repair Manual: Practical Advice for Beginning Poets*. Bison Books; 2007.

About the Author



Amy Haddad, PhD, RN, FAAN helped lead the growing national awareness of the importance for formal ethics education in the health professions. Her expertise was relatively unique in the pharmacy world and she quickly established herself as an innovative and prolific scholar. Her focus was on inculcating a solid foundation in ethical theory that was then explicitly translated to contemporary clinical practice. The ethical care of patients was always the articulated goal of her teaching. Haddad's list of external awards is long and distinguished. She received recognitions for creativity, intellectual curiosity and rare talent such as Carnegie Scholar, Robert K. Chalmers Distinguished Pharmacy Educator, Pelligrino Medal, Rho Chi Lecture awards and was named a Hastings Center Fellow and a Fellow in the American Academy of Nursing. She completed an MFA in Creative Writing at Queens University in Charlotte, NC in 2019.