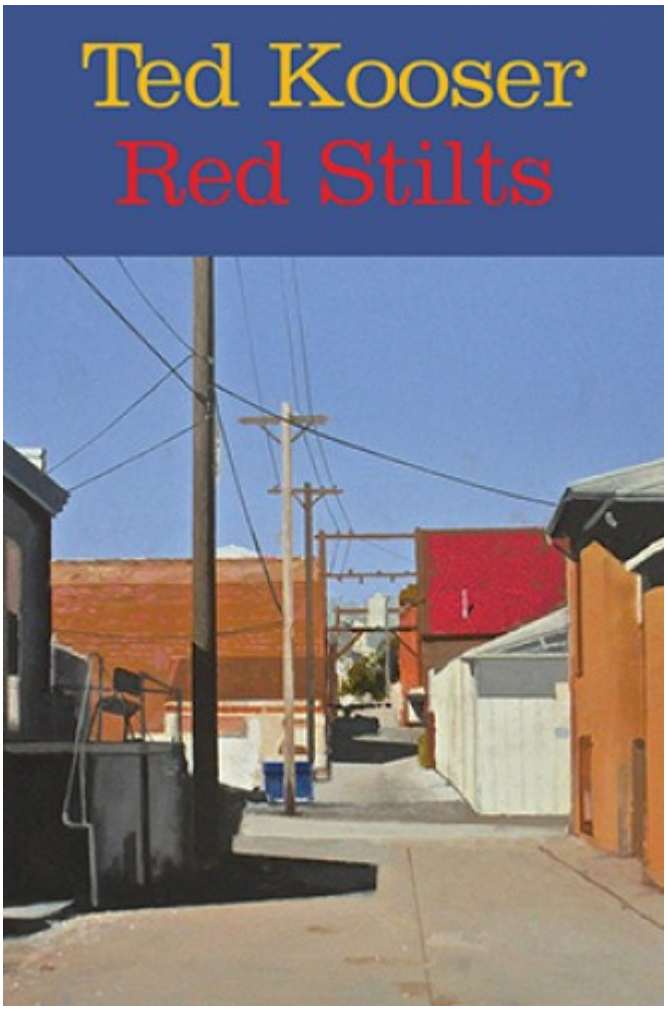
Ted Kooser’s poetry of the Great Plains resonates across the world

The beloved American poet lifts the everyday into the realm of the transcendent.

by James Crews in the November 18, 2020 issue

In Review



Red Stilts

Poems

By Ted Kooser
Copper Canyon Press
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The title poem of Ted Kooser's fifteenth book exemplifies the humility and approachability that have been hallmarks of his work for the past six decades. In "Red Stilts," he remembers as a young boy constructing a set of stilts "from six-foot two-by-twos, with blocks / to stand on nailed a foot from the bottom." He then describes setting out on the stilts for the first time, "not knowing how far / I'd be able to get."

The setting of his poems has never strayed far from the Great Plains where he has always made his home, yet the poems themselves have traveled all across the world. Kooser won the Pulitzer Prize for his luminous 2004 collection, *Delights and Shadows*, and he served two terms as US Poet Laureate from 2004 to 2006. He also recently retired from editing the syndicated column American Life in Poetry, which now reaches 4.6 million readers worldwide each week. Kooser's humble character, threaded throughout *Red Stilts*, comes as a welcome shift from the ego-driven discourse to which we have grown accustomed as a culture.

In the poem "In Early August," Kooser faithfully renders the scene of "dragonflies, a hundred / or more out hunting together," without needing to involve himself in the narrative. At first, he notices simply "a stirring in the golden air, the way / a glass of water stirs when some enormous truck / drives past . . ." But the poem quickly evolves beyond mere description, as Kooser allows those dragonflies to do their work in solitude:

> and what it was that they
> were holding back, it seemed to me, was nightfall,
> and they held it a long, long time as I looked on,
> afraid to step outside and stand among them,
> not knowing what there'd be that I could do.

The poem "Up the Block" offers another moment of gentle observation. We begin with the sight of a neighbor watering her "small plot of petunias" as the speaker passes by, noticing everything from the colors of the flowers to the shape of the hose nozzle. The speaker doesn't turn away until he has fully seen this woman whom he addresses directly as

enrapt, or so it appeared, by what
you saw sprinkling out of your hand,
upon which I could see drops forming,
each diamond-bright on a knuckle,
and I'd guess they were cold, perhaps
even numbing, but you'd gotten hold
of a rainbow, and couldn't let go.

Kooser's mastery rests in his ability to lift an ordinary, seemingly mundane encounter like this into the realm of the transcendent with just a few extra lines.

In Kooser's later work, the act of painstaking remembrance has become central to his purpose. He lends the power of his presence to recalling his own childhood. In "Ohio Blue Tip," we watch the speaker's father "light his pipe / with a stick match pinched from the trough / of the matchbox holder nailed by the door." The poem begins with a snapshot of little apparent consequence, until the last lines show us this son watching as his father

studied the thin curl
of smoke as it lifted away from the tip
and then vanished, and it seemed he could
read something special in that, but he
never would say what it was.

Though his father would not define the "something special" that Kooser observed, the poem itself makes the lighting of a pipe into a kind of sacrament through the simple act of remembering. We feel this too as a moment of connection between father and son, both of them participating in this daily ritual and paying attention together to "the thin curl / of smoke" that soon disappears.

In "An Overnight Snow," Kooser recounts the ritual of his father and a neighbor shoveling snow before work:

Only a few sounds
came in to me out of the predawn darkness:
the scrapes of not one but two shovels, each scrape
with a tap at the end to knock off the snow, then

a word or two, muffled, back and forth . . .

Here we find late tenderness for the unspoken kindness his father performed for the whole family long before they rose from bed. Later in the poem, Kooser says he could “see their boot prints—can see them still, after seventy years . . .” suggesting that kind, loving actions can live on longer than any of us might imagine.

At a time when so many of us must dwell in virtual worlds, before a screen, *Red Stilts* offers us over and over the wonders of everyday life rendered with precision and care. Kooser’s poems, so like the simplest of prayers themselves, remind me of what Simone Weil once wrote: “Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.” It’s impossible not to relish the “unmixed attention” given in each of these quietly sublime poems, which place us effortlessly back into the present moment.