



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

Written by Ted Kooser

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

By Ted Kooser

Lights On A Car

Like the yellow, pink, and blue irises that had been transplanted from house to house over the years, the stories of poet Ted Kooser's family had been handed down until, as his mother lay ill and dying, he felt an urgency to write them down. With a poet's eye for detail, Kooser captures the beauty of the landscape and the vibrancy of his mother's Iowa family, the Mosers, in precise, evocative language. The center of the family's love is Kooser's uncle, Elvy, a victim of cerebral palsy. Elvy's joys are fishing, playing pinochle, and drinking soda from the ice chest at his father's roadside Standard Oil station. Kooser's grandparents, their kin, and the activities and pleasures of this extended family spin out and around the armature of Elvy's blessed life. Kooser has said that writing this book was the most important work he has ever undertaken because it was his attempt to keep these beloved people alive against the relentless erosion of time.

"Our memories of a place, no matter how fond we are of it, are little more than a confusion of lights on a ground of darkness." • Edwin Muir

"Attention must be paid." Arthur Miller. (Linda Loman, about her husband, Willy Loman),

U.S. Poet Laureate Kooser's mother was dying in the fall of 1997 and so he took that occasion to write down an essay "a remembrance" that he had been putting off for decades, thinking he couldn't do justice to it, that it was too important to screw up. He wanted to create a snapshot of a time and place. Here's a couple excerpts:

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From page 4

On the south edge of this little town, past the empty mussel shell button factory and the lumberyard, past the abandoned creamery and a few trailer houses glinting in the sun, sits a red brick Standard Oil filling station and, near it, shaded by a tall catalpa, a white bungalow with a screened porch. The graveled driveway is lined with smooth boulders freshly whitewashed, and a neatly pruned hedge separates the front yard from the highway. On the porch, my grandmother, a thin, shy woman in her late sixties, carefully waters a huge fern in a wicker planter. There is a patch of irises next to the front

stoop, yellow and salmon pink and blue, from roots that have been moved from house to house down the years.

In the yard behind the house, a wooden picnic table has been pulled up under a low-branching Chinese elm, and my sister, Judy, who is seven, and I, ten, are playing "Swinging Off the Table." It's a game we have just invented, and it involves great daring and much squealing and laughter. Each in turn kicks off and swings away from the table on a low branch that slowly bends to set us down on the grass. Our only audience as we play is my grandmother's little flock of white leghorn hens, bunched together at our side of their pen, watching us as if we were something to eat. We are here during our annual two-week summer stay with our grandparents. Our mother is with us, somewhere in the house, and our father is two hundred miles away. He will be coming to take us all home when he is able to get away from his store. . .

From page 57

But for now, it is summer, 1949, and I am still a little boy. Our time with our grandparents is over. My father has come to drive us home. Before we leave, he fills his arms with tiger lilies picked beside the house, and we start out walking up the gravel road to the cemetery. It is now too late for irises. They have shriveled to rags. My sister and I walk on either side of him. I look back and see my grandmother stooped in her garden, picking a few vegetables for us to take home. My uncle shuffles across the yard toward the filling station.

There's a granite monument topped with the carved figure of a seated girl. Her head is bowed, and she looks sadly into her empty arms, which are pitted from many years of rain and snow. In the hollow of those arms my father arranges the bright orange flowers and steps back. We do not know whose grave this is, whose loss the statue memorializes. My father's eyes mist over, for he is a soft-hearted man, easily moved. His is a very special sort of foolishness, and my sister and I are learning it from him. We carry flowers to this girl at the close of each summer. It's what my father calls "tradition."

There's nothing special about the idea of a book like this. Anyone could do it. 60 pages about your mother's family, something gone--or eventually gone--to the wind. But then again, maybe just the doing of it makes a project like this worthy of consideration. It's like W. C. Williams's wheelbarrow; just noticing and remembering the mundane is important. The world we see and hear can matter, if we notice--pay attention--and honor it in language.

The center of this memoir is Kooser's uncle Elvy, who has cerebral palsy. Elvy is loved; he likes to fish and play cards and drink soda pulled from the ice chest at his father's roadside Standard Oil station in Iowa. Kooser's grandparents are here, and their kids and grandkids, and we get from scribe Kooser little pen and watercolor sketches of them in this small town. And who cares? Me, as it turns out, thanks to Kooser. And maybe you.

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attempt to keep these beloved people alive against the relentless erosion of time. And he does it, with irises blooming. And one thing you get from this, if you are a person of a certain age, especially, is that everyone should and can do this. You know, there's something really special about a book like this in that everyone could do it.

Maybe over the holidays you should check it out. The best of your family might begin to warm and shine for you, like figures in the carpet. In the last decade of my father's life, I sat both he and my mom down and interviewed them on videotape for 6 hours. They both are gone now, but I have that tape, which is in itself good to have, it's valuable to me, but I need to now take that tape and distill it into art. That's what Kooser does; he inspires you to do something like he has done. And the simple way he does it, the way he honors simple people, in accessible language, with such grace and heart!

Here's the whole thing.

<https://books.google.com/books?id=O8t...> ...more

Lights On Afterschool

The writing in this book is just beautiful: a slim sixty pages of pure, liquid beauty. The author, a former U.S. poet laureate and a Pulitzer Prize winner in poetry, has, with his perfectly chosen words, brought his family back to life. His is prose written in the language of a poem:

"The courthouse stands in its leafy square, its great gray bulk afloat on the deep and slowly rolling ocean of time. It is a kind of buoy, marking a submerged reef of obscure laws, its tower like a silent bell.

It is November, and the towering maples that surround the building have lost nearly all of their leaves except for a few unsettled lawsuits pinned here and there." (page 28) He says he wanted to write about these people, his ordinary yet particular Midwestern kin, so they wouldn't be lost to time. He has preserved them perfectly. Reading the book is like going back with him to his childhood and sitting alongside the gas station his grandfather ran as the old men from town play horseshoes, or waiting on his grandparents' screened porch for an assortment of relatives to drop by and play pinochle. This book made me think of my own long ago childhood and of relatives dead these many years. How I wish I had the talent to preserve them as he has done for his family. He has captured life in mid America in the early to mid-twentieth century. What a work of art to enfold so much in so few words! ...more

Only 60 pages, but every bit of it was beautifully written and meant to be savored (and what else would you expect from a Pulitzer Prize winner and former poet laureate of the U.S.?) It's a gentle tribute to his family, written in the form of a reminiscence of a summer visit to his maternal grandparents who lived in Guttenberg, a sleepy little Iowa Mississippi River town:

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Lights On A Boat

Remarkable little (60 pages) book written by former U.S. poet laureate Ted Kooser. He feels that writing this book is the most important work he has ever done and introduces it this way:

"From the time I was a little boy I dreamed of one day writing a marvelous book about my mother's family."

He has done just that.

His family is of Swiss/German heritage and settled in Osterdock and then Guttenberg, Iowa. Family names so different from my own; names like:

Clarence, Mabel, Alvah, Dorthea, Harvey and (my favorite) Parthenia. Remarkable little (60 pages) book written by former U.S. poet laureate Ted Kooser. He feels that writing this book is the most important work he has ever done and introduces it this way:

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Clarence, Mabel, Alvah, Dorthea, Harvey and (my favorite) Parthenia.

Here are a few gems:

"I fasten on every detail, as if it were a button on his coat."

(looking at an old photo of a little-known relative)

"I have begun to see his hands out at the end of my arms."

Reading this leaves me feeling all misty "like the cool colors of summer shadows."

...more

I must admit I was surprised by this book. I expected (perhaps not unreasonably) that because the previous books by the author I had read were all books of poetry that this book would be a collection of poems as well. Only this book wasn't a poetry collection at all, but rather a memoir of the author's mother's family, which appears to have been a rather small and obscure family. Although this book was certainly an unexpected one, it was not an unwelcome one, as the author has a winning way of writing. I must admit I was surprised by this book. I expected (perhaps not unreasonably) that because the previous books by the author I had read were all books of poetry that this book would be a collection of poems as well. Only this book wasn't a poetry collection at all, but rather a memoir of the author's mother's family, which appears to have been a rather small and obscure family. Although this book was certainly an unexpected one, it was not an unwelcome one, as the author has a winning way of

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talking about his family even if he does not show himself to be all that sympathetic himself--the author's discussion of his own political worldview and his awkwardness dealing with conservative relatives does not make him come off very well, for example. It is touching and hopefully appreciated that the author chose to write some deeply personal stories about his family, though, as well as their background and context in an area of the world that I must admit I am not very familiar with at all. Nevertheless, I suspect that most of us could write a similar sort of memoir about our family and the quirks of the stories, even if most of us would be hard-pressed to say it so well.

This book is a short one at just over 50 pages, but it certainly has a fair amount to say despite its short size. The book begins with a poem written in honor of the poet's mother, who died after a life of almost 90 years. After this comes some black and white pictures, and then a preface that explains why the author put off writing this book and then why he ended up writing it anyway. Finally, after all that the author takes on the task of writing about his family and setting that story in a place--near the little town of Guttenburg, Iowa, and a time, starting in the middle of the 20th century. There are looks at the shops, including the gas station that the author's maternal grandfather ran for many years after his retirement, and a look at the history of the area, which includes one of the more obscure battles of the Revolutionary War. There are also plenty of memorable characters, among whom are a bachelor named Joel, Harvey and Helen, who traveled to Europe before dying close to home, a career in music ending in destitution through illness. There is also the author's uncle, a kind but simple-minded man, who serves to reveal the character of those around him as is so often the case.

The author's revelation of the life of his mother's and grandparent's families and the area where they lived is an interesting picture of a sort of world that many people are unaware of these days. We see a rural world where minorities are nearly absent, where habits and patterns of existence go on for generations, where the importance of having sons to keep up the family name and help out with the family farm are of critical importance, and where a great many cruelties as well as kindnesses linger on for a long time. We see how people choose to avoid tormentors in an area where being close to one's enemies would be intolerable, and see how little the arts of civilization are regarded by those who trust what is close to the land and mistrust anything that is not particularly tangible. The author conveys a limited world with perhaps limited sympathy, but not without some insight at least, insight readers would do well to examine and critique for themselves. ...more

Lights On Airpods

This book is an evocative, prose love letter about the poet's Midwestern family roots. Kooser wanted to honor his mother's people from Iowa and also name and claim the attitudes from an era of people who accepted life as it came and took care of their own, especially Uncle Elvy, suffering from cerebral palsy and simply incorporated into the family, not farmed out for care. Kooser's grandfather, being medically evaluated late in life, apparently had a burst appendix as a boy - and simply endured. This book is an evocative, prose love letter about the poet's Midwestern family roots. Kooser wanted to honor his mother's people from Iowa and also name and claim the attitudes from an era of people who accepted life as it came and took care of their own, especially Uncle Elvy, suffering from cerebral palsy and simply incorporated into the family, not farmed out for care. Kooser's grandfather, being medically evaluated late in life, apparently had a burst appendix as a boy - and simply endured and survived it. These are hard-working people with a love of their hard-scrabble land and lives that Kooser captures and saves for all of us. ...more

Ted Kooser is one of my favorite poets. This short memoir is in prose but very poetical prose. His stories of ancestors he remembers growing up in Iowa are wonderful. I am reminded of small-town, farm life that I experienced.

Lights On A Car Dash

Perhaps my rating is too influenced by the fact that I was expecting a book of poetry, though Kooser's prose is, indeed, poetic with rich sensory details and a taste of Midwestern living. The book does not disappoint. Next time I will read the book description rather than just going by the title.

Dec 30: Lovely, evocative, short, poetic but with a light touch. I can't wait to read it again, just for the stories, characters, scenes and images he conveys with such economy and precision.

Lights On A String

What to say. Kooser is one of, no...there can be no question...my favorite poet, living or dead. As strange as it would assuredly sound to him, a consideration one is forced to take when discussing the living, Mr. Kooser is one of the very few people I'd call a hero of mine. Certainly the only one living. Thanks to Goodreads, I found out about the existence of this little book a few weeks back, and managed to get a copy at my local library. I hope to acquire a copy for my personal library sometime when I can.

What is *Lights on a Ground of Darkness: An Evocation of a Place and Time*? It's an evocation of a time, places, people, family, and relationships. In 60 pages, Kooser made me laugh hard twice, my eyes bug out with wonder once, and weep four times. That's a lot more than most authors can manage to do in 600 pages.

I'd understand if the very young didn't get it, or disliked it. There IS a certain amount of aging required to feel a connection with the past, if for no other reason than as it slips silently past you, you begin to feel your own past and relationships grow further and further away, like the sound of a ship's bell on a dark night, you cannot see it, but the sound tells you of its passing. As you feel this loss, you grow more interested, eager, perhaps even a little worried about remembering, preserving, keepsafeing your memories but also those of others, as though somehow locking them away behind museum glass, appropriately framed and labeled will preserve their meaning to the crowds of disinterested and bored children made to file past on a field trip. This reminds me of the protagonist in *Slow Man* and his thoughts about the photographs he wills to the state when he passes.

But you'll feel the constant impact of memory and emotion in this book. I so very much want to describe each and every passage where I could feel along with him, but I also very much hope you'll instead read this little book, and feel it for yourself. ...more

Careful, delicate, reverent description pays homage to Kooser's mother's family. Beautifully evoking the Turkey River valley of northeastern Iowa, and the people who lived there in the nineteenth and twentieth century, this brief memoir is a corrective to the dour and dreary portraits of midwestern settlers. Black elms growing up the cliffs behind his grandparents' house, with the limestone bluffs of Wisconsin blinking across the river, invite the reader to savor every element of an overlooked I

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Wisconsin blinking across the river, invite the reader to savor every element of an overlooked landscape. The book is full of interesting tidbits: "In the 1840s, an artist named Henry Lewis . . . painted a panorama of the Mississippi, from the falls of St. Anthony to New Orleans, on a roll of canvas twelve feet high and 1,325 yards long. The canvas was meant to be scrolled past the proscenium of a theater during a lecture." From the story of Harvey, a talented musician discovered in Clayton County who tours the world with the best orchestras, only to return to the home place when arthritis slows him down, to the grandfather whose life encompassed, on one end, the invention of barb wire and, on the other, the atomic bomb, Kooser captures the fragility of time and the human capacity to adapt to change. Full of beautiful, attentive images such as a childhood glimpse of the white of a field mouse's belly as it naps under the leaf of a tulip vine, to the four white columns of smoke from the cemetery as the gravediggers warm the frozen ground for his grandmother's burial, this book is a breathtaking portrait of "the center of our love." ...more

Lights On Arris Modem

Lights on a Ground of Darkness by Ted Kooser (Book Reaction)

Sometimes a guy needs a reminder that his life is attached to the land and to a history of people called family. Kooser's writing provides that reminder that helps grow roots - like the roots of the irises that were passed down generation to generation in his own family. The irises keep coming back year after year, Kooser says, as if they sense that nothing's changed.

The stories Kooser tells make me pause and remember some of my own. I

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The stories Kooser tells make me pause and remember some of my own. I feebly scratch them in a journal, doing my best to imitate Kooser's art, but falling (as of now) quite short. After a few paragraphs of either Kooser's writing or my own, I pause to dwell in a moment of flooding memory detail. Watching the memory swell and fade in three minutes' time.

After finishing Lights on a Ground of Darkness, I'm resting and recollecting the substance of a life that is rooted in place, family, and tradition. Resonating with that substance and seeing it well within me, I gather my dreams and prayers and say to myself, "I've had enough vagabondry." ...more

On Thanksgiving Day, I heard a piece on NPR interviewing Mr. Kooser (a former National Poet Laureate) about this book and his reasons for writing it. The excerpts he read aloud made me cry, as I drove alone in my rental car towards my family's Thanksgiving dinner. The thoughts he shared on the concept of this book really stuck with me- once we lose the people, the older generations, that make up our past, our understanding of their lives and the world they existed in is hugely diminished, becoming "a confusion of lights on a ground of darkness" (in the words of Edwin Muir).

This book was unlike any I'd read before. A memoir-styled biography of his mother's family, Kooser's beautiful poetic prose is simply breathtaking. A very short read, I read it through more than once,

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savoring Kooser's clear, evocative words describing the lives and times of his extended family in rural Iowa. I could keep awkwardly stumbling on in an attempt to explain more about what made it so magical to me, but I won't do this great book any justice. You simply must read it. :) ...more

Lights On Amazon

You read my tag correctly. This is Kooser's memoir, not a collection of poems. A short little book of sixty pages, Kooser certainly reaches his goal stated in the subtitle: "an evocation of a place and time." The guiding story is the preparation and playing of a pinochle game at his grandparents house when he is just a boy of ten. As more and more family members arrive, Kooser weaves their stories into the narrative. It's very effective. Sometimes, he flashes forward in time to explain other sto

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I will say that I wished for a family tree graphic. We are treated to many relatives--sometimes his aunt, sometimes his grandpa's uncle. It gets very confusing at times, and I thought that could have been cured with a family tree. ...more

Kooser is my favorite of all my favorite poets, so any time I find anything he has written I read it. This memoir (in prose) was just great. In one passage, about some ancestor of his that died in infancy, he tells about the baby's headstone. The M.L.M. initials were broken from its base. He thinks someone brought the broken piece of headstone home and planned to return and cement it back into place. That never happened. Then, when the house sold, Kooser's mother got the MLM stone and kept it wi

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Lights On A Juul

This book is a gem -- a quiet, poetic and gentle reminiscence of the author's family. His grandparents, his parents, his uncles and aunts -- all are seen through a loving, attentive and honest lens. Nothing much happens, but in the beautiful simple stories he honors their everyday lives (and ours).

Two of my favorite quotes:

"The banks of every river are made of history."

"We are learning the way in which stories end, how they drift into near silence, yet leave an after-ringing, like a bell." Koos This book is a gem -- a quiet, poetic and gentle reminiscence of the author's family. His grandparents, his parents, his uncles and aunts -- all are seen through a loving, attentive and honest lens. Nothing much happens, but in the beautiful simple stories he honors their everyday lives (and ours).

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"We are learning the way in which stories end, how they drift into near silence, yet leave an after-ringing, like a bell." Kooser's stories are like that -- drifting quietly, but leaving a clear bell-like resonance.

...more

This slim memoir, a compilation of vignettes really, is about members of Poet Laureate, Ted Kooser's family. After years of anxious procrastination Kooser finally wrote this tribute to his deceased loved ones when his mother, the only survivor in the family, became gravely ill. He finished the manuscript before his mother died and she liked it. I did, too. It is set in Iowa. I recognized the setting and the people - my home and neighbors for 20 years. Kooser's poetry suffuses his prose. It's lovely. This slim memoir, a compilation of vignettes really, is about members of Poet Laureate, Ted Kooser's family. After years of anxious procrastination Kooser finally wrote this tribute to his deceased loved ones when his mother, the only survivor in the family, became gravely ill. He finished the manuscript before his mother died and she liked it. I did, too. It is set in Iowa. I recognized the setting and the people - my home and neighbors for 20 years. Kooser's poetry suffuses his prose. It's lovely.

...more

Lights On A Dashboard

This is a very sweet recollection of childhood visits to Kooser's grandparents' place in Guttenberg, Iowa, in and around 1949. It recalled to me the land along the Mississippi River. He writes about a lifestyle that is gone forever: as each generation passes away and the world changes. Kooser chooses words in a wonderful way - I like his poetry, too.

I love poetry, and I can enjoy remembrances of things past -- to a point. Kooser crosses my threshold of patience. Nothing really "happens." I kept confusing characters, in-between unexpected naps. The floral metaphors were positively bullying, as if to say, "DID YOU NOTICE? I'M A METAPHOR! LOOK AT ME, LOOK AT ME!" For such a short volume, "Lights" will cure many nights of insomnia.