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A collection of poetry by Ted Kooser.

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Jan says

I'm giving this book a five-star rating because I know I will keep the book, I know I will re-read it, and I know I will urge it upon the appropriate friends. I am new to Ted Kooser's work but will be looking for more. I probably don't mind the persistent focus on winter weather because it matches my own interest and mood. I suspect the focus on winter reflects his sense of very recently hunkering down and surviving the "blizzard" of cancer and chemo, of recognizing that he is older, white-haired, and facing an inevitable chill as life's arc pulls him inevitably toward his final season. I'm eager to find more Kooser poetry now. Thank you to my friend who gave me this book, filled with amazing metaphors, for a recent Christmas gift.

Margaret says

I always think it 's best to let the poet speak for himself:

Five below zero.

The cold finds its way through the wall
by riding nails, common ten-penny nails
through a wall so packed with insulation
it wouldn't admit a single quarter-note
from the wind's soprano solo. Yet you can touch
this solid wall and feel the icy spots
where the nails have carried the outside
almost into the house, nickel-sized spots
like the frosty tips of fingers, groping,
and you can imagine the face
of the cold, all wreathed in flying hair,
its long fingers spread, its thin blue lips
pressed into the indifferent ear
of the siding, whispering something
not one of us inside can hear.

Nathan Albright says

Sometimes a book of poems surprises you in a very good way. I must admit that before reading this book I was not familiar at all with the poems of the onetime Poet Laureate Ted Kooser, and this book was an excellent first look at his approach to poetry, although I cannot consider it a very common book of poetry. Indeed, this book of poetry suggests the sort of exercise that would be useful to many of us who are poets, and that is committing to writing poems that can fit on a postcard to someone who is an appreciative reader out of whom an entire volume of poems like this one can be selected [1]. While I do not know of any readers of mine who would appreciate daily poems of the kind that this one represents, this book certainly does a good job at providing a worthwhile concept for some truly arresting and intriguing short poems, many

of which are of the kind that I could see myself reading if I lived in the country or if I was writing poems about the place in the country where I spend a fair amount of time.

This short book of poetry consists, as its title suggests, 100 short poems written on postcards from the author to a friend and sometime collaborator of his. All of the poems are short, and they are organized in chronological fashion from November 9, 1998 to March 20, 1999. One might think that the task of writing poems, all of which include the temperature during the morning when it was taken before the poem was written, would be a tiresome one, but the constraints the author subjected himself appear to make this all the more interesting as an exercise, and one that is worth repeating for others. As a way of overcoming depression and understanding that someone cares that one is alive, this book of poetry is therapeutic as well as deeply poignant and thoughtful to read. The poems are written in free verse, but are full of alliteration and vivid imagery that gives the reader an impressionistic sketch of a winter scene being discussed. We see frosty fingers and a "deeply troubled, sighing furnace" trying to heat the house in the midst of the chill, and the reader can imagine oneself witnessing or experiencing the same scene that is being discussed concisely but beautifully.

How is it that this book works so well? For one, its theme keeps its contents focused on the experience of observing and writing about winter scenes. For another, the author is skilled at finding something worth writing about, taking in a scene and making compelling poetry out of it. This sort of exercise would appear to hone the author's creativity by giving him something to do daily, a way of overcoming listlessness and melancholy, and by giving him an audience who cared about what he has to say, something every author needs, no matter the genre. This book manages to do several things at once. For one, it shows a poet engaged in a worthwhile exercise of writing his insights on a particular period of time where he happens to live, and contain some very observant details. For another, the book is the kind that not only encouraged the author in its creation but also encourages others in reading it and in pondering whether such an effort could be done by other people at other times with the same worthwhile benefits in encouraging a daily pattern of watching the conditions of one's world as well as recording it and sending it to someone else, an audience of one that will be merely the first of many appreciative readers.

[1] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2018...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2018...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2018...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2018...>

Jean says

It feels odd to indicate that I am finished with this book, because I will open it over and over in the future, savoring the glimpse of a wintery Nebraska through Ted Kooser's lens. It is stunning in it's simplicity and heart.

Dan says

This is, without a doubt, the best book of poetry I have ever read. Kooser is a magician and a master.

Anatoly Molotkov says

"...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." An utterly moving collection of evocative short poems written during one winter, perhaps the right time for magic of this sort in the poet's life.

Ryan Acosta-Fox says

I appreciated both the poetry and the structure of the book.

Sayantani Dasgupta says

Each word a gem, each line a jewel. So present in the moment especially considering these were written when the poet was recovering from surgery and yet these aren't filled with complaints or reproach. Rather they're filled with wonder, awe, imagination, curiosity, love, close observation, and gratitude.

Sample this for example:

MARCH 12

Only a crust of moon is left
to offer the morning,
but that maybe enough for now,
what wit our frosty picnic table
so heavily laden with stars.

Jennie says

Lovely series of poems written during a winter of daily pre-dawn walks. Kooser sent each poem on a postcard to a friend. Here's one that I like:

november 18

Cloudy, dark and windy.

Walking by flashlight
at six in the morning,
my circle of light on the gravel
swinging side to side,
coyote, raccoon, field mouse, sparrow,

each watching from darkness
this man with the moon on a leash.

Rita says

There are many books of poetry that must be read silently and alone, and then there are rare books of poetry, like Ted Kooser's Winter Morning Walks, that can be shared, read to each other while eating breakfast in bed, even crying with each other about the beauty of the writing. These short poems are reader-friendly without ever compromising the high integrity of what a great poem can be.

Michael says

Some of the best short poetry I have read in a long time.

David Schaafsma says

Some poems from Winter Morning Walks: 100 Postcards to Jim Harrison, by Ted Kooser:

1. Perfectly Still This Solstice Morning

Perfectly still this solstice morning,
in bone-cracking cold. Nothing moving,
?or so one might think, but as I walk the road,
the wind held in the heart of every tree
?flows to the end of each twig and forms a bud.

2. When I Switched On a Light

When I switched on a light in the barn loft?
late last night, I frightened four flickers
?hanging inside, peering out through their holes.
Confused by the light, they began to fly
wildly from one end to the other,
their yellow wings slapping the tin sheets
?of the roof, striking the walls, scrabbling
and falling. I cut the light
and stumbled down and out the door and stood?
in the silent dominion of starlight?
till all five of our hearts settled down.

3. Walking by Flashlight

Walking by flashlight?
at six in the morning, ?
my circle of light on the gravel ?

swinging side to side, ?
coyote, raccoon, field mouse, sparrow,
each watching from darkness
?this man with the moon on a leash.

4. I Saw a Dust Devil This Morning

I saw a dust devil this morning, ?
doing a dance with veils of cornshucks
?in front of an empty farmhouse,?
a magical thing, and I remembered ?
walking the beans in hot midsummer,?
how we'd see one swirling toward us
?over the field, a spiral of flying leaves
?forty or fifty feet high, clear as a glass?
of cold water just out of reach,?
and we'd drop our hoes and run to catch it,?
shouting and laughing, hurdling the beans,?
and if one of us was fast enough,?
and lucky, he'd run along inside the funnel, ?
where the air was strangely cool and still,?
the soul and center of the thing,
?the genie who swirls out of the bottle,?
eager to grant one wish to each of us.?
I had a hundred thousand wishes then.

5. My Wife and I Walk the Cold Road

My wife and I walk the cold road
?in silence, asking for thirty more years?.
There's a pink and blue sunrise?
with an accent of red:?
a hunter's cap burns like a coal?
in the yellow-gray eye of the woods.

6. All Night, in Gusty Winds

All night, in gusty winds,
?the house has cupped its hands around?
the steady candle of our marriage,
?the two of us braided together in sleep,?
and burning, yes, but slowly, ?
giving off just enough light so that one of us, ?
awakening frightened in darkness,?
can see.

7. Our Finch Feeder

Our finch feeder, full of thistle seed?
oily and black as ammunition,?
swings wildly in the wind, and the finches ?
olive drab like little commandos? cling to the perches, six birds at a time,?

ignoring the difficult ride.

8. Spring, the Sky Rippled with Geese

Spring, the sky rippled with geese,?
but the green comes on slowly,?
timed to the ticking of downspouts.
The pond, still numb from months?
of ice, reflects just one enthusiast ?
this morning, a budding maple?
whose every twig is strung with beads?
of carved cinnabar, bittersweet red.

9. How Important It Must Be

How important it must be
?to someone ?
that I am alive, and walking,
?and that I have written ?
these poems.
This morning the sun stood?
right at the end of the road?
and waited for me.

Now, if you will, read Kooser's explanation of how the poetry came about:

"In the autumn of 1998, during my recovery from surgery and radiation for cancer, I began taking a two-mile walk each morning. I'd been told by my radiation oncologist to stay out of the sun for a year because of skin sensitivity, so I exercised before dawn, hiking the isolated country roads near where I live, sometimes with my wife but most often alone.

During the previous summer, depressed by my illness, preoccupied by the routines of my treatment, and feeling miserably sorry for myself, I'd all but give up on reading and writing. Then, as autumn began to fade and winter came on, my health began to improve. One morning in November, following my walk, I surprised myself by trying my hand at a poem. Soon I was writing every day.

Several years before, my friend Jim Harrison and I had carried on a correspondence in haiku. As a variation on this, I began pasting my morning poems on postcards and sending them to Jim, whose generosity, patience, and good humor are here acknowledged. What follows is a selection of 100 of those postcards."

Now, take a glance at those poems again and see if you don't see them/hear them differently.

I also read the letter exchange poems of Harrison and Kooser, haikus across the miles, and liked them. Harrison is now dead, RIP, just the summer of 2016; Kooser is not. Nor are Dawn Upshaw, an opera singer, and Maria Schneider, a composer, two fellow cancer survivors and the central collaborators of a wonderful project that emerged out of the reading of these poems. The music is haunting and gorgeous. Reminds me of the joyous melancholy of Joni Mitchell's Blue. Some of the music is instrumental, with rich cello and violin and voice. Haunting and inspiring. Oh, and they use the very poems you read above, in that sequence, beginning with fall equinox and ending with spring. Yep, he started to feel better that year.

Here's an NPR piece on the musical project that emerged out of the poems, and sure, you get to hear some of it, which will hook you on it:

<http://www.npr.org/sections/deceptive...>

Here's another piece, related:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/st...>

This is a link to the actual album:

<https://www.amazon.com/Winter-Morning...>

Thanks for telling me about this Kooser, Luis Urrea. I loved this so much. With special interest, perhaps, for all my friends and family who are--or who are close to--cancer survivors (which is what, all of us?). And to poets and musicians and artists everywhere who enrich our lives with hope and grace and beauty. The CD of the music comes with all the poems. If I were you, I'd get that in your hands in preparation for the winter, or yours. Oh, and it's not really about cancer, actually. It's about life.

Tara Schaafsma says

What beautiful writing. My favorite type of poetry.

Laura says

december 3

Clear and cool.

I have been sitting here resting
after my morning stroll, and the sun
in its soft yellow work gloves
has come in through the window
and is feeling around on the opposite wall,
looking for me, having seen me
cheerfully walking along the road
just as it rose, having followed me home
to see what I have to be happy about.

december 23

Cold.

As if to spare the birds at the feeder
any more competition than they already have,
a snowflake drops right past the perches
crowded with finches, nuthatches, sparrows,
and without even thinking to open its wings
settles quietly onto the ground.

march 18

Gusty and warm.

I saw the season's first bluebird
this morning, one month ahead
of its scheduled arrival. Lucky I am
to go off to my cancer appointment
having been given a bluebird, and,
for a lifetime, having been given
this world.

march 20

The vernal equinox.

How important it must be
to someone
that I am alive, and walking,
and that I have written
these poems.
This morning the sun stood
right at the end of the road
and waited for me.

I picked this book up simply because I loved the title, not knowing Ted Kooser wrote this while recovering from surgery and radiation for cancer. I love it when Fate works her "perfect timing" magic and I should find myself reading this while recovering from my own surgery for a second go-round with cancer. (Prognosis very good.) Being unable to go on my normal daily walks to get a generous dose of nature, reading this book of poems of winter walks has been a lovely, lovely way to spend a few hours. :)

Ken says

Not as good as other Kooser books I've read, but still kind of cool, especially in light of their origin. Kooser wrote these poems as he was recovering from surgery for cancer in 1998.

Then he taped them to postcards (pre-email, I suppose) and sent them daily to his buddy Jim Harrison (also a writer). Wouldn't I like to find these in the mailbox every day for three months running! Dream and on.

Most all are short. Most all deal with nature. As he could not go out in the sun due to meds, Kooser walked in the pre-dawn darkness two miles every day.

We are brothers in boots on that count. I walk the dog in pre-dawn darkness daily, too. Not two miles, though. I've got work to get to. And eggs to fry. (Hey, better than axes to grind.)

As you might expect, some of the poems have themes of mortality, a theme that interests me keenly because I am mortal:

november 14

*My wife and I walk the cold road
in silence, asking for thirty more years.*

*There's a pink and blue sunrise
with an accent of red:
a hunter's cap burns like a coal
in the yellow-gray eye of the woods.*

Here's another variation, also from the november batch, which I found stronger:

november 28

*There was a time
when my long gray cashmere topcoat
was cigarette smoke,
and my snappy felt homborg
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.*

In addition, between every date and poem, Kooser provides a brief weather observation (e.g. sunny and pleasant, clear and still, ten degrees at sunrise, light snow flying). Thus, you get more of that old-time postcard feel.

So, yeah. A nice run of short stuff. Almost like poem-a-day drills, only by a master -- one who sent them before he could revise them. I think.
