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On Ted Kooser, Kim Robert and William Stafford

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REVIEWS

Not Coming to Be Barked At

Ted Kooser

Pentagram Press

Milwaukie, Wisconsin \$3.00 paperback

Understand just the title of this book by Ted Kooser, and it is like putting a key in a lock. For the phrase “not coming to be barked at” is, in its own way, a kind of affirmation. And what Kooser gives us, in poem after poem, is affirmation. Even here in the poem “Fort Robinson”:

When I visited Fort Robinson,
where Dull Knife and his Northern Cheyenne
were held captive that terrible winter,
the grounds crew was killing the magpies.

Two men were going from tree to tree
with sticks and ladders, poking the young birds
down from their nests and beating them to death
as they hopped about in the grass.

Under each tree where the men had worked
were twisted clots of matted feathers,
and above each tree a magpie circled,
crazily calling in all her voices.

We didn't get out of the car.
My little boy hid in the back and cried
as we drove away, into those ragged buttes
the Cheyenne climbed that winter, fleeing.

Even here something is salvaged and learned. For a few lines at least, it is that winter, we are Cheyenne.

Kooser's voice and tone is almost always subdued—down home and ordinary. It is a voice that seems to come precisely from the country it speaks of, from Nebraska, cornfields, wheat. It has that calm, and sweep of distance. Yet even within this almost flat tone, and perhaps because of it, Kooser's poems have a greater impact than one might first suspect:

There Is Always A Little Wind

—for Debra Hulbert

There is always a little wind
in a country cemetery,
even on days when the air stands
still as a barn in the fields.

You can see the old cedars
stringy and tough as maiden aunts,
taking the little gusts of wind
in their aprons like sheaves of wheat,

and hear above you the warm
and regular sweep of wheat being cut
and gathered, the wagons creaking,
the young men breathing at their work.

Pentagram Press has printed a handsome book, and Ted Kooser has filled it with poems that matter. The best of them will stay with you for a long time.

Lex Runciman

Braided Apart

Kim Robert and William Stafford
Confluence Press, Inc.
Lewiston, Idaho \$3.50 paperback

For native Oregonians, few books will ever bring them closer to home than this one by Kim Robert and William Stafford. Partly it is Kim's remarkable photographs, but mostly it's the recurring natural elements of landscape and weather—the familiar lush vegetation, the common rain. Both Staffords can tap this natural wealth at will:

You can't see it in summer, cruising the river
road with an eye for water birds, the hills
green and deep above; but in winter light
when the trees are bare but for their bones
each driver's eye is drawn to the old road
curving through moss and cliffs of evergreen fern.

(Kim's "Old Siuslaw Road")

But there is much more going on in these poems, more than just landscape, as in Bill's "Remembering A First Grade Music Teacher", where the landscape and the human reflect each other:

Her non-representational near face
fixed my gaze on local dramatics—
the old skin, lines of storm and calm, eyebrows.
And there behind her glasses, in those lakes that
forgot summer, I found the numb center, then slid
away, outward, upward, outward . . .

The service of those stern ones, the knowers,
the ones who demand a further note,
has lifelong set me toward islands,
toward fields tested by nothing but grass,
toward stones at the coast that hold amid waves.
And in church I never sing.

What the Staffords do, at their frequent best, is not just describe a landscape, but create it, and create inside it a human world. The result is nothing less than a string of small masterpieces. Poems like Kim's "A Story I Remember Hearing That No One Told" and Bill's "At the Coast" do what only the best poems can do, they give us something of our own lives.

To say this is a book just for Oregonians, or just for Northwesterners, would be an injustice and a lie. It *is* a book that's regional, but regional in the best sense, located where we live:

One moment each noon, faced
where the sun is, turn
from events to the church in the stone.
The shade under your hand
welcomes you. Let the lamp
in your forehead explode.

In the long dive of your life
past the sun, these are important,
these meetings. Repeat:
"Rescue me, Day. Hills,
hold the light." Lift your hand.
Let the dark out.

(Bill's "The Saint of Thought")

Braided Apart is the first book out from Confluence Press (they also publish *Slackwater Review*). We can only hope it's an indication of things to come.

Lex Runciman