

Saving Faces: Art and Medicine  
Ted Kooser Thursday, January 26, 2006 7:00pm

Thank you all for coming. It's a wonderful honor for me to be here. Dr. Lydiatt and the University of Nebraska Medical Center saved my life and I owe them a great deal. I managed to survive head and neck cancer and then all these wonderful things happened to me. I wanted to begin tonight with a little poem that I wrote recently. Lots of my friends come up and put their hand on my shoulder and say, "How are you doing? How are you holding up under all that stuff? Are you doing okay? How is Kathy doing? Is she all right," that kind of thing. So I wrote this poem in answer, and it's called "Success."

## **SUCCESS**

**I can feel the thick yellow fat of applause  
building up in my arteries, friends,  
yet I go on, a fool for adoration. Do I care  
that when it sloughs off it is likely to go  
straight to the brain? I am already showing  
the first signs of poetic aphasia,  
the words coming hard, the synapses  
of metaphor no longer connecting.  
But look at me, down on my knees  
next to the podium, lapping the last drops,  
then rolling in the stain like a dog,  
getting the smell in my good tweed sport coat,  
the grease on my suede elbow patches,  
and for what? Well, for the women I walk past  
the next morning, the ones in the terminal,  
wheeling their luggage, looking so beautifully  
earnest. All for the hope that they will  
suddenly dilate their nostrils, squeeze  
the hard carry-on handles, and rise to  
the ripening odor of praise with which I have  
basted myself, stinking to heaven.**

My internist, Scott Rasmussen is here tonight, and he too was worried about the fat of applause building up in my arteries and ran me through an ultra-fast heart scan not too long ago.

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A little history. At the end of 1997, my mother was dying. She had emphysema and heart trouble and I was going back and forth to Cedar Rapids, Iowa, from Lincoln, to visit her every other week or so and it was a tremendously stressful time for me. I had had canker sores over the years and I developed what I thought was a persistent canker sore on the back of my tongue. But I was so preoccupied with mother that I didn't do anything about it. My wife and I went to a wedding in Tennessee in early May and it was sore and I was thinking well, maybe I ought to have somebody look at this, but then there was mother again. So I put off doing anything and cancelled my dental appointment in mid-May because by that time there were some estate issues my sister and I were working on. I finally got to the dentist the first of June and he looked me over and cleaned my teeth and said, "Well, everything looks okay," and I said, "Take a look way back on my tongue on the left side. There's something there that's been bothering me. He looked and said right away that he had better send me over to the dental school for a biopsy. So we did that and then I was referred to Bill Lydiatt and we drove to Omaha and of course, I was terrified. I came up here to the Med Center and Bill did the initial interview and looked me over and he said, "I'm going to have to take a sizable chunk out of your tongue. Do you do any public speaking?" And I said that there was none that I couldn't give up to get better. My wife was there and she said, "Well, you know, he is a poet. He does do poetry readings." And that was all that was said about my writing. We had another appointment in another ten days and we came up and discovered that Bill had taken the time to go to the Omaha Public Library and check out my books and read them. I thought, this is the doctor for me. And he's been the doctor for me ever since. I'm going to read some things tonight about the experience I went through and, as Bill said, I would be happy to take questions and I'll tell you anything about me. This first poem was written at the Med Center in

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the waiting room, or notes were made at that time, waiting for a follow-up checkup at the Cancer Clinic.

### **At the Cancer Clinic**

**She is being helped toward the open door  
that leads to the examining rooms  
by two young women I take to be her sisters.  
Each bends to the weight of an arm  
and steps with the straight, tough bearing  
of courage. At what must seem to be  
a great distance, a nurse holds the door,  
smiling and calling encouragement.  
How patient she is in the crisp white sails  
of her clothes. The sick woman  
peers from under her funny knit cap  
to watch each foot swing scuffing forward  
and take its turn under her weight.  
There is no restlessness or impatience  
or anger anywhere in sight. Grace  
fills the clean mold of this moment  
and all the shuffling magazines grow still.**

I saw that sort of thing time and again in those waiting rooms. It was a marvelously humbling experience.

There's a poem in "Delights and Shadows" that really sets up the experience, showing how, after you stare death in the teeth, how important the world is, how vivid it seems to become.

### **Surviving**

**There are days when the fear of death  
is as ubiquitous as light. It illuminates  
everything. Without it, I might not  
have noticed this ladybird beetle,  
bright as a drop of blood  
on the window's white sill.  
Her head no bigger than a period,  
her eyes like needle points,  
she has stopped for a moment to rest,  
knees locked, wing covers hiding  
the delicate lace of her wings.**

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**As the fear of death, so attentive  
to everything living, comes near her,  
the tiny antennae stop moving.**

Now about this book, "Winter Morning Walks." I had surgery and then radiation in Lincoln, and finished that at the end of August of '98. I was pretty well blown apart by radiation. Head and neck radiation is very difficult and I was on liquids for several months. But I knew that I needed to get my strength back, and my radiation oncologist, Dr. Dina Howell-Burke, who was practicing in Lincoln, told me to stay out of the sun because of photo-sensitivity. So I would get up before dawn and walk a mile down the road and a mile back. I started doing that early in September and my writing, although it had been a passion all my life, was very far from me. I was completely self-involved, trying to get enough nutrition and keep going. To those of you who haven't gone on a liquid diet, I might say it is a bitch to get 1700 calories a day. You have to be drinking all day long, so that was a major undertaking right there. Later on in the fall, one morning I had gone out walking and come home, and I had seen something along the road and I wrote a little poem about it and was tremendously pleased that I had finally rediscovered my ability to write. One of my very dear friends is Jim Harrison, a novelist, screen writer and poet, who spends the winters in Arizona. So I taped this poem on a postcard and sent it to Jim and the next morning I wrote another one and taped it on a postcard and sent it to him. I did that all winter, wrote 130 of these short imagistic poems in sequence and then took a hundred of them and made a little book. I didn't really intend to be writing a book. It was just something I was doing.

Poetry is a way of establishing a little package of order, sometimes from a very disorderly life. A little square of words with everything just exactly where they should be. It's only this big and

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disorder is all around you, but if you can do that little thing, you feel better about things. The same would be true of drawing or painting, Or composing a little music. There was tremendous reassurance in being able to convince myself that there was still some order that I could define in that way.

You know, after September 11<sup>th</sup>, the internet was absolutely choked with poems about 9/11 and they were heartfelt, every one of them. We're not talking art here and there were some pretty clumsy things, but I think what was happening was that people all over the world really had suddenly been exposed to an enormous body of complete disorder and chaos and were trying to find some way of reckoning with it and poetry came to mind as being that solution. I'll read a few of these morning poems and then we can talk a little. The very first poem in the group was actually written later. I wrote it because I wanted a preface. It sets up the gravel road I walked every day, down to the end and back. My late father was a store manager, who at one time had been a drapery salesman. He loved bolts of cloth, and I This one sets up the poems to follow.

**The quarry road tumbles toward me  
out of the early morning darkness,  
lustrous with frost, an unrolled bolt  
of softly glowing fabric, interwoven  
with tiny glass beads on silver thread,  
the cloth spilled out and then lovingly  
smoothed by my father's hand  
as he stands behind his wooden counter  
(dark as these fields) at Tilden's Store  
so many years ago. "Here," he says smiling,  
"you can make something special with this."**

So every day, I tried to make something special from that gravel road.

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Here's the very first one I wrote. This was on the 9<sup>th</sup> of November and each of these poems has the date and then a little note about the weather.

**November 9 – rainy and cold.**

**The sky hangs thin and wet on its clothesline.**

**A deer of gray vapor steps through the foreground,  
Under the dripping, lichen-rusted trees.**

**Halfway across the next field,  
The distance (or can that be the future?)  
Is sealed up in tin like an old barn.**

**November 10 – high winds all night**

**Most of the snow passed north of us,  
But this morning we're given the fancy white lace  
At the edge of that blanket,  
Every weed on the roadside coated with ice.**

**Behind the counter at the post office,  
Somebody's small carton stamped with block letters:  
ANGEL MOMENTS WITH SNAIL.**

**I drive very slowly all the way home.**

**November 12 – 4:30 AM**

**On mornings like this, as hours before dawn  
I walk the dark hall of the road  
with my life creaking under my feet, I sometimes  
take hold of the cold porcelain knob  
of the moon, and turn it, and step into a room  
warm and yellow, and take my seat  
at a small wooden table with a border of painted pansies,  
and wait for my mother to bring me my bowl.**

**November 14 - in the low 40's and clear**

**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.**

**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.**

There was always this, all through this period of course, there's this forboding. You know, I had just gotten through this treatment. Who knows how well it worked, you know. This poem is pretty typical of that.

**November 20 – clear and still, a heavy frost**

**The pale gray road lit only by stars.  
A rabbit runs ahead, then stops  
at the edge of the sound of my footsteps,  
then runs ahead and stops again,  
trembling in darkness  
on the cold outer rim of the 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.**

And you know, this fastening on detail, as I did with that ladybird poem. Looking at everything as if there was something there for me.

**November 29 – breezy and warm**

**A round hay bale,  
brown and blind, all shoulders,  
huddled, bound tightly  
by sky blue nylon twine.  
Just so I awoke this morning,  
wrapped in fear.**

**Oh, red plastic flag on a stick  
stuck into loose gravel,  
driven over, snapped off,  
propped up again and again,  
give me your courage.**

**Celebration Dec 4 – foggy and dripping**

Notice the way this one opens.

**I was alive and looking  
the right direction  
when hundreds of starlings  
were perched on the sky,  
or so it seemed,  
thought they were really  
sprinkled all over  
the aluminum roof of a barn  
that in fog was sky,  
the color and wetness of sky.  
They made a noise  
like water dripping as they pecked  
at the slippery gray,  
but only for the instant  
in which I was to be their witness,  
For then, without a sound,  
Both sky and roof went blank,  
and cleanly separate,  
and every bird was gone.**

I want to find the one about my dear dog. I should have marked these a little bit better. I love them all. This is the most important book I ever wrote, at least to me, because it was so intimately connected with the experience of getting better. Here I am, right at the end of the year, December 31<sup>st</sup>, looking back.

**December - Cold and snowing.**

**The opening pages forgotten,  
then the sadness of my mother's death  
in the cold, wet chapters of spring.  
For me, featureless text of summer  
burning with illness, a long convalescence,  
then a conclusion in which  
the first hard frosts are lovingly described.  
A bibliography of falling leaves,  
an index of bare trees,  
and finally, a crow flying like a signature  
over the soft white endpapers of the year.**

And of course, I was writing about our home life as well. I'm pretty fond of this little picture...my wife, Kathy, works as the editor of the Lincoln Journal Star and was of course going to work every day while I was staying home feeling sorry for myself.

**January 4 – four below zero  
My wife took an apple to work**

**This morning, hurriedly picking it  
up and out of a plastic bag  
on the kitchen counter, and though  
she has been gone an hour,  
the open bag stillholds in a swirl  
the graceful turn of her writs,  
a fountain lifting. And now I can see  
that the air by the closet door  
keeps the bell-like hollow she made**

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**spinning into her winter coat  
while pushing her apple through a sleeve  
and back out into the ordinary.**

Okay, here's the dog poem I was looking for. This is me with my very old spotted dog, Hattie, who was literally on her last legs. We say that very flippantly but she really was.

**January 19 – still falling greasy**

**Arthritic and weak, my old dog Hattie  
stumbles behind me over the snow.  
When I stop, she stops, tipped to one side  
like a folding table with one of the legs  
not snapped in place. Head bowed, one ear  
turned down to the earth as if she  
could hear it turning, she is losing the trail  
at the end of her fourteenth year.  
Now she must follow. Once she could catch  
a season running and shake it by the neck  
till the leaves fell off, but now they get away,  
flashing their tails as they bound off  
over the hill. Maybe she doesn't see them  
out of those clouded, wet brown eyes,  
maybe she no longer cares. I thought  
for a while last summer that I might die  
before my dogs, but it seems I was wrong.  
She wobbles a little way ahead of me now,  
barking her sharp small bark,  
then stops and trembles, excited, on point  
at the spot that leads out of the world.**

The last one in the book was up here on the screen at one time. I continued to write poems, but as far as this particular type of thing I was doing, I quit in the spring, on March 20<sup>th</sup>, on the vernal equinox. And this one is not typical of my poems because it is such an overstatement.

**March 20 – The vernal equinox**

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**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.**

Thank you.

(applause)

Does anybody have a question for me? I'll tell you anything about me.

Q: Your book, "Local Wonders"... it was the first prose that you had written although the language in it is so melodic, it's almost like poetry. Do you anticipate doing any more of that type of writing?

A: Oh I hope so. I enjoyed that very much. There are poems in that book that are disguised as prose. As a matter of fact, for example, there's a section about a spring thaw that begins with one drop of water that becomes a flood. That was written as a regular lined-out poem and I changed it back into prose for that book. People are not afraid of prose, but they are afraid of poems. You slip right into prose without any effort at all.

Q: Ted, tell us a little bit about your two years as Poet Laureate and what your schedule is like these days.

A: Well, I have been extremely busy. I have done around 160 events like this in two years. I've done over 100 interviews, television, radio, newspapers and so on. Lots and lots of travel. It's been very tiring. You know, I was living the life of a geezer at home on my little farm, sorting screws into baby food jars and doing things like that, geezerly things, wearing old pants with baggy knees and old cardigan sweaters with corks and nails and stuff in the pockets. And then this happened to me quite suddenly, and all of a sudden, I thought, okay, well, if they're going to give you this job, you'd better try to do a better job than anybody has ever done before, so I really threw myself into it. Generally, I have enjoyed it a great deal. I have been so thrilled that at almost every reading I've done, afterwards, someone has come up to me, some man, kind of a little clumsy, you know, with his thumbs stuck in his belt, comes up to me and says, "You know, my wife dragged me to this thing tonight. You couldn't have got me into a poetry reading under any circumstances, but I had a pretty good time and I'm going to give this poetry stuff a chance." And I now have this newspaper column. Some of you may have seen it, the Omaha World-Herald runs it, and the Lincoln paper, It's called American Life in Poetry. It's estimated right now that we're in around 150 newspapers with a combined circulation of around 11 million. Just the week before last, we picked up the Atlanta Constitution and the Chattanooga paper, which is another million readers right there, or potential readers. It's sponsored by the Library of Congress and the Poetry Foundation in Chicago and the Department of English. Linda Pratt is here today, and she was my Chair at that time and helped me set the whole thing up. It's going very well and it's not going to stop when I'm done with being Poet Laureate. I want to keep it going. It's that's been a lot of fun. Generally, being poet laureate is the best job I've ever had.

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Q: Did your original treatment affect your speaking ability?

A: My voice is lower than it used to be. It can be very low if I want it to be. I have a persistent dry mouth because the big salivary glands got cooked and don't work and my voice is lower and sometimes it's really low, but other than that, I think I can speak as well as I ever could ...at least it sounds okay from inside.

You sound great.

Oh, thank you.

Q: Mr. Kooser, I wanted to tell you I love to see the poetry in the newspaper on Sundays. Can I ask you, what about putting poetry on the radio? Have you ever thought about having some kind of thing like that?

A: Garrison Keillor has that Writer's Almanac that he's doing, and the Poetry Foundation, the same people that gave me my money, give money to him for . So, I don't know. I can imagine doing some radio shows, but as far as a regular radio thing, I think it's pretty hard to beat Garrison Keillor. He really does it very well I think. There are all kinds of things we ought to be doing to get poetry out.

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Mr. Kooser, I listen to you as you told lately how you were unable to go out and enjoy the sun during your treatments and how you wrote about it. I can relate to that and I just really enjoy hearing how you are able to still enjoy the nature even though you could not enjoy everything about the nature. It was beautiful.

Thank you, Thank you.

Q: Yes, Mr. Kooser. Along the lines of a previous speaker, how about doing a CD of your poetry. I love hearing you read your poetry.

Well, thank you. Actually, there's been some talk about that. The problem is, and these things get to be kind of bureaucratic, is that I have several publishers, each of whom has a vested interest in some of those poems and each of them thinks that they should be the distributor of the CD. The University of Nebraska Press and Nebraska Public Radio has talked to me about having me read the whole of Local Wonders on a CD and that may happen sometime, but it's a daunting thing for me because you know, as I said, I've got a dry mouth and the idea of...Nancy Finken down at public radio timed me reading 200 words and then she called me up and she said, I figure it's going to take you 7 ½ hours to read this and I thought, God!

Q: Mr. Kooser, do you have some advice, some suggestions for us ordinary folks that might like to write and how we would start and what we would do and then secondly, can you imagine your writing without the wonderful images that you've derived from Nebraska in the Midwest?

A: I do love it here. I've lived in Iowa and Nebraska all my life. It's my place and I want to write about it and celebrate it, but you know, I suppose if I had been born in Connecticut, I'd be writing about Connecticut. If I was writing at all. You know, these literary careers are very peculiar. If I had been born in Connecticut, I might be a pipe fitter. I've often thought how odd it is the way a life assembles itself, that if in third grade at an intersection I had turned right instead of left,, everything in my life would be different, and I've had an enormous number of extremely lucky breaks that you couldn't duplicate again.

I'll give you an example of that. The University of Nebraska Press published my Local Wonders book about Nebraska. At that time, I hadn't won any of these awards. I was fairly well known as a Nebraska writer, but that was about it. Steve Hilliard, who is a colleague of mine in the English Department, was then the acting director of the press. He said one day, "We think this book will do pretty well locally, but we have no idea how it will do nationally." But they took the book to the New York Book Expo and put it out on their table with a hundred other titles or more, so it's just among all these other books, and a woman comes walking along, opens it to a passage about a cowboy shirt that my mother made for me when I was fourteen, and she was touched by that passage. It turns out that she's the woman who picks the books for the Barnes and Noble Discover Awards. So off it goes, you know. Now there's no way...there is absolutely no way that this could have ever been choreographed. Now back to your original, initial question, I think the most important education for a writer is reading, reading, reading, reading, reading, reading. The students with whom I work at the University of Nebraska... every one of them could benefit by having read more poetry by the time they

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got to me, and so I tell them that I would like to have them read a hundred poems for every one they try to write. I doubt very much if any of them do it, but it's a good idea. Reading is extremely important because that's the way we learn to write. We learn to write by imitation and by reading things good and bad. Even junk is okay to read, you know, because you learn from writing that fails, learn why it failed. You know what's missing and that's very important.

I have a new book coming out, by the way, that was written with Steve Cox, who formerly was a director of the University of Press. He went to the University of Arizona and was their director. It's called, "Writing Brave and Free, Encouraging Words for People who want to Start Writing" and the big thing that we address there, which is the obvious thing, is the fear of failure. You know, we set these high standards for ourselves and we want to write something that's good, and so right away, we're up against something awful, the judgment of others and ourselves. You can really enjoy writing, you know. You don't have to worry about whether or not it's any good or not. It's a good thing to be doing with your time, far better than watching reruns of Law and Order.

Q: How would you describe the state of poetry in our nation compared to previous years?

There's a very healthy environment for poetry. If you try to talk about poetry as one big thing, American poetry as one big thing, it's very difficult. But if you look at the separate communities within poetry, we have the rap poets, we have the cowboy poets, we have the hip hop poets, we have the literary poets...each of those groups is thriving within its own community. The rap poets are having a terrific time. They've got a huge audience. They're writing rap. They're listening to it. They're all involved with each other. They could care less what the cowboy

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poets are doing and the cowboy poets are having a wonderful time and they don't care a bit about the poems in the New Yorker. They're having a good time. As it happens, the only group who thinks that everyone should be writing like them are we literary poets. And we're dead wrong in that, you know. But there's a very big audience for poetry that can be approached if you show people that poems are available to them, that they're accessible, that they can be understood and appreciated. There was an enormous audience for poetry until 1920 but ever since then poetry has drifted off into more and more elitism and exclusivity. But there's always been the other strain there too. As William Carlos Williams said, he wanted to write things that dogs and cats could read. And I'm part of that tradition.

Q: I'm the guy you talked about with the thumb in the belt and I'm a reader. And my wife loves your stuff, so she kept shoving it at me across the coffee table. Try this and finally I did and you know, she brought her copy of *Delights & Shadows* and you'll be pleased to know that it's all dirty and dog-eared and it's got coffee stains on it and I like it and I've never liked poetry.

Thank you very much.

So I'm delighted that you represent us all and I hope you'll continue.

Thank you very much. (applause)

Q: Taking your advice to heart, who are some of your favorite poets that you would recommend reading?

A: Oh gosh, you know, there are hundreds if not thousands of poets writing good poems in this country, and those of us who are fairly well known, all of us write bad poems as well. If you find a book of poems in which there are two or three poems you think are worth keeping, that's a really good book. That's a successful book. I read and read and read and read. I just finished reading 300 books of poetry to judge a competition and I saw lots and lots of single poems that I thought were really marvelous. I didn't see too many books that I thought were good through and through. I hesitate to name people cause I'm going to be leaving somebody out. I suggest you just walk through the poetry stacks at the library and pull some books down and look at it, and if it happens that Robert Louis Stevenson or Kipling or Sarah Teasdale are the poets who fall into your hands then, that's fine. It doesn't make that much difference, but you know, I just encourage you to just try it anyway.

Q: My question is focusing at that intersection that was discussed prior to your getting up, the intersection between creating whether it be poetry or sculpture or composing or whatever it is, that intersection between creating and healing, what does the creative process that you go through do for the healing process that you're going through? How do they come together or what angst do they create that affects you as you're going through the healing process?

A: Well, I wrote those little poems in the morning and after I had written one I forgot for a little while that I was getting over a terrible illness. I felt pretty good about myself, that I had written this thing and I was pleased with it, and in effect, happy with it. Now surely there's some medicine in that, some good medicine and just feeling good about something you've done, you

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know, rather than brooding on dying. So there's that possibility. And there's also the process of writing. It requires a tremendous amount of concentration. So for a little while, you are completely out of the world. That's all you're doing, you know, and I think that that's probably good for you too. I'm convinced that there's a connection.

I've never been terribly burdened by depression, but I had a lot of friends who had a lot of difficulty with it, and one thing that is a counter to depression is playing with color. It's pretty hard to really feel gray when you've got a whole lot of color you can smear around in front of yourself. So that sort of thing I think is part of it too, the use of art for healing.

Q: Mr. Kooser, what are your thoughts on slam and have you ever attended a poetry slam?

I have never been at a poetry slam. I've watched them on TV. I've been invited to come up here and go to the one up here. I haven't done it frankly, not because I'm not interested in it. Just that I haven't had the time to do it. I think anything like that is fine. It's poetry, you know, and people are participating in it. They're having a good time. Why not? Is it art? I don't know. Who cares?

Q: Now that you're a Poet Laureate again, you're in the leadership role and so, do you consider yourself a leader of poetry? And I'm interested in that intersection in poetry and leadership. Do you think that poetry can bring out greater leadership within? I'm looking at whether or not that creative process can make for better leaders.

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A: I'm really afraid to think that I'm leading poetry at all, or that I'm a leader in that sense. I look at myself as being the public relations guy for poetry. I did that sort of work in my professional life when I was still in business. I did public relations and I think it probably helped me, and I think being in business probably helped me set up the column and run the column and so on. But I don't want to put myself above any of the other poets in the country, which leadership would suggest. I wouldn't feel at all right about that. But, you know, this job has brought things out of me, resources that I wasn't sure that I had.

Q: Mr. Kooser, this session was focused on healing group poetry and you talked about the people in the waiting rooms trying to avoid death. What about comfort through poetry for people who have terminal cancer, advanced cancer and are on hospice and such. Do you have any poetry or any thoughts about poetry written for comfort for them and for their loved ones?

Poetry is such an individual thing. I think that for some person, a certain kind of poems could be particularly comforting. For another person, they could be entirely different. To my knowledge, there's not an anthology of poems that's particularly good for that kind of thing. If I were in hospice, something that I would like would be to have somebody come and read poems to me rather than me reading them to myself. If I could get somebody to come and sit there and read poems to me I wouldn't care whether they were Edgar Guest or William Shakespeare, you know. It's the idea of having the community of that sort of an experience I think would be very good. I'm sorry I'm not more helpful with that, but....

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Q: What do think inspired you to first write poetry?

A: Girls. That's the truth.

How did it work out?

Well, I don't know what it would have been like if I had been football hero. I don't really have anything to compare it with, so....It was the only thing I had going for me though, I'll tell you.

Q: Mr. Kooser, I just want to share with you the fact that I'm also a Med Center cancer survivor and am just so grateful that I came tonight and the reason being your readings that you've done have touched so much some of the feelings that I have had. Sometimes I forget through my work at the Med Center with patients in helping them and doing things, that I ever had cancer. Other days, I remember and it's like, Oh well that's okay because I don't have cancer anymore and then sometimes there's just that moment when you just feel a chill and you don't know where it came from and you weren't thinking about it and you feel like the bug you were talking about earlier, but it's just as frozen and still and trying so hard not to even think about the fact that you may in the future still have cancer. [Yeah] And the image that you gave at the end of your readings of the sun at the end of the road is something that the next time that this moment comes, is going to be what I'm going to be thinking about, that sun at the end of the road and I want you to know that just in the last hour, I'm sure you've touched more than just myself and given so much to me through your poetry. And thank you so much. [Well thank you. That's very nice of you] And I do have one question that I am just dying to

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know and that is, is one of those gorgeous looking pups up there in your slide, one of those who was your companion during your morning walks?

No, actually, those two dogs are the successors of those earlier dogs. The black and white dog looks very much like the dog I described in that poem, but no, these dogs are still with me. The black and white one is very smart and the lab is very stupid. [Thank you]

Q: Yes, Mr. Kooser, as one who writes for poetry as far as healing goes, I was really impressed to see this on the web's poetry website, do you see a person with any kind of illness going back or continuing that healing, that recovery, even though the major trauma is over and the importance of continuing that as they grow in their lives?

You mean as almost like a preventative?

A preventative or just a continuation of life?

I would hope so. Once you figure out something that works, you don't want to quit it.

Q: You may have answered this question previously between girls and having people read to you, but what do you recommend for schools to encourage, the elementary and high schools, more of an appreciation of reading and writing and also a greater appreciation for the Niehard, Sandoz, Cather, you know, the Nebraska grades also?

A: I've gone to the National Council of Teachers of English meeting two years running now and spent a lot of time talking to English teachers about what works and one of the nice things about that convention is they've got tremendously dedicated teachers there, people who really think about this a lot and it's my impression that what we have to do is we have to somehow or other, convince younger people that poetry is fun, and that will help immensely because we have taught them for years that poetry is not fun, that it is a problem that needs to be solved and that there is one answer and the teacher has it in her handbook and if you don't get it right, you flunk. And so what happens is, you graduate from high school and two years later you see a poem in a magazine and you think, I don't have to do that anymore. I passed that course. So we have to show people that poetry can be pleasurable and get away from the idea that a poem is a riddle that has one answer only. A poem is an experience. It's an experience like taking a drive on Sunday. It is simply another experience that is presented to you and you take it into your life and use it however you will. That's the way we can, I think, teach it, and I'm hoping....I was feeling around one day, talking to some people about the idea...one thing we could do is to take the English curriculum and we could divide it in half. We could have literature and fun, and on the literature side, we have all the stuff that they struggle so much with, but we reward them with the fun side at the same time. I don't know. I don't do that kind of teaching anymore. I taught high school one year, so I'm certainly not an expert at that.

Q: Hi Mr. Kooser. I just want to thank you for being one of the biggest influences that I've had. I'm a student here at UNO, creative writing major and I want to thank you for inspiring me to just say I'm going to do what I want to do and I want to write. One question that I had is what

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are your personal writing rituals? How do you get started and also, when you do write, how do you know when it's done?

A: I was in business for 35 years. I was sort of thrown out of graduate school after one year because I was such a lousy scholar. At that time, there wasn't a creative writing program at Nebraska. It was a regular MA/ PhD program. They took my assistantship money away from me cause I did such a lousy job as a student. Now I have an honorary doctorate. But back to the business. I had to be at the office eight hours a day. I had to be in Lincoln at my job, at my desk at eight o'clock and be there till roughly five. So I got in the habit of getting up very early in the morning and writing until I had to get dressed for work. I would get up at 4:30 or sometimes 5:00 and write until 7:00 and I still do that. I've done that every day for forty years, and day after day after day, nothing good happens. I sit there with my notebook. And then, every once in awhile, something good does happen. Maybe every week or sometimes even ten days. But if I weren't sitting there waiting, I wouldn't get that one. You have to show up for work. That's the way it goes. So good luck to you.

Thank you and I just wanted to know, do you know when you're done or does the editor just tell you to stop writing. My problem is that I will rip it apart and rip it apart and I don't know when to stop.

A: Well, I recommend that you hang on to the earlier drafts because sometimes what happens is that you write and polish and polish and polish and then you finally come up with a poem that is perfectly polished and there's not a drop of blood left in it. It is completely without life.

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Then you can back up to one of the versions that still had some and work on that a little bit. But I don't know, I think it was Auden who said that we never really finish a poem. We just abandon them,. And that's the way I feel. I stop when I can't think of anything else I can do to make it better.

Q: What was your favorite poem that you wrote?

Right now, I'll read it to you.

It's a little poem in this book and it's called "Screech Owl." And what happened was, we live in the country and there's about a hundred feet from the house up to the road where the mailbox is, and in the morning, I walk up to get the paper and sometimes it's dark. We have a big row of trees along the driveway. One morning, I heard a screech owl making this sort of whinnying sound that they make.

### **Screech Owl**

**All night each reedy whinny  
from a bird no bigger than a heart  
flies out of a tall black pine  
and, in a breath, is taken away  
by the stars. Yet, with small hope  
from the center of darkness  
it calls out again and again.**

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I like that poem because of the idea of hope calling out into the darkness and that's one that I wrote and wrote and wrote and it got smaller and smaller and smaller as I went, compressed into shape.

Q: I taught lower elementary for 34 years and just retired. We started every morning with a poem and so my little first graders would start writing their own little and the first time they saw one of their poems up on the bulletin board or mama's refrigerator, they were thrilled. What did it feel like to see your very first piece of work or piece of poetry in print?

A: The very first poem that was ever printed was one that I had not submitted, but that some friends of mine had submitted for me. I was sixteen years old and it was a poem about a hotrod race that I had written and it was submitted to a magazine called Dig, The Teenage Magazine, and when it came out they sent me a copy of it and I remember being completely surprised but also pleased. It was kind of a dumb poem, but it felt good, and I suppose I kept it up all these years because of little pleasures like that. Actually though, I've learned over the years, and it's very hard to convince students of this, that the real pleasure in writing poetry is not in getting it published and not in winning awards and doing things like that. It happens while you're writing the poem. You're sitting there and you're struggling with something and all of a sudden, in from the side, comes something that just really gets you and you think, My God, did I just write that? That's the real fun of it. It's in the process, you know. And if you can take your sustenance from that, then you don't have to worry about, is it good or is it publishable or any of that other stuff. People who fear rejection by publishers don't understand that it's just one editor out there and that person may have had indigestion all night long when

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your poem came. When you get a poem rejected by a literary magazine, it isn't the world telling you, you're no good. It's just one person telling you that they didn't like that particular poem, and that shouldn't be discouraging to people.

Q: I enjoyed that you included information about the weather on the days that you wrote, but I was wondering what significance you attached to it?

Well, I figured out a long time ago that the poems that have lasted the longest in world literature, the ancient poems, many, many of them tell us about the place in which they are written. In the ancient Asian poems you always know about the place and the weather and the season and all that. I think why we feel natural about the inclusion of weather is because that's what we do in conversation. If I met you on the street and I wanted to tell you a story, I'd say, you know, the other morning, I got up and it was just raining like everything and I went outside and it was cold... and then I'd get on into my anecdote. That's just the way we relate, making a little setting for what happened to us.

Q: It's really a comment. Twelve years ago, I had my surgery at UNMC and I've been partaking in an art program through another hospital, but I'm so delighted that the importance of art has been brought to the healing process and a way for cancer patients can channel their strong emotions through art and the need for medicine, the caretakers to be aware of that. It's just been very helpful for me

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Yeah, I think that's wonderful..Why don't we close with that? Let's applaud this whole event for that reason, OK? Thank you very much.

End of transcription.

### **Acknowledgement**

The poems in Ted Kooser's presentation are from two books, Delights and Shadows, Copper Canton Press, 2004 and Winter Morning Walks; 100 Postcards to Jim Harrison, Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2000. They are published here by permission of the author. The poem, "Oh, Mariachi Me" is also published by permission of the author.

### **OH, MARIACHI ME**

**All my life I have wanted nothing so much  
as the love of women. For them I have fashioned  
the myth of myself, the singing troubadour  
with the flashing eyes. Always for them  
my black sombrero with its winging tassels,  
this vest embroidered with hearts, these trousers  
with silver studs down the seams. Oh, I am  
Mariachi me, as I had intended. I am success  
and the price of success, now old and dusty  
at the edge of the dance floor, still smiling,  
heavy with hope, clutching my dead guitar.**

*Ted Kooser, Valentine's Day 2006*