

DELIGHTS & SHADOWS



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Poet Laureate of the United States

Winner
Pulitzer Prize
for Poetry

Delights & Shadows

TED KOOSER



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Thank you. We hope you enjoy these poems.

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for Kathleen

The Sailor cannot see the North,
but knows the Needle can.

Emily Dickinson, in a letter to Thomas Wentworth Hig-
ginson, 1862

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I. WALKING ON TIPTOE

Walking on Tiptoe

Long ago we quit lifting our heels
like the others — horse, dog, and tiger —
though we thrill to their speed
as they flee. Even the mouse
bearing the great weight of a nugget
of dog food is enviably graceful.
There is little spring to our walk,
we are so burdened with responsibility,
all of the disciplinary actions
that have fallen to us, the punishments,
the killings, and all with our feet
bound stiff in the skins of the conquered.
But sometimes, in the early hours,
we can feel what it must have been like
to be one of them, up on our toes,
stealing past doors where others are sleeping,
and suddenly able to see in the dark.

Tattoo

What once was meant to be a statement —
a dripping dagger held in the fist
of a shuddering heart — is now just a bruise
on a bony old shoulder, the spot
where vanity once punched him hard
and the ache lingered on. He looks like
someone you had to reckon with,
strong as a stallion, fast and ornery,
but on this chilly morning, as he walks
between the tables at a yard sale
with the sleeves of his tight black T-shirt
rolled up to show us who he was,
he is only another old man, picking up
broken tools and putting them back,
his heart gone soft and blue with stories.

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.

Student

The green shell of his backpack makes him lean
into wave after wave of responsibility,
and he swings his stiff arms and cupped hands,

paddling ahead. He has extended his neck
to its full length, and his chin, hard as a beak,
breaks the cold surf. He's got his baseball cap on

backward as up he crawls, out of the froth
of a hangover and onto the sand of the future,
and lumbers, heavy with hope, into the library.

Gyroscope

I place this within the first order
of wonders: a ten-year-old girl
alone on a sunny, glassed-in porch
in February, the world beyond
the windows slowly tipping forward
into spring, her thin arms held out
in the sleepwalker pose, and pinched
and stretched between her fingers,
a length of common grocery twine
upon which smoothly spins and leans
one of the smaller worlds we each
at one time learn to master, the last
to balance so lightly in our hands.

New Cap

Brown corduroy,
the earflaps tied on top,
the same size cap he bought
when he was young,
but at eighty-six
a head's a smaller thing,
the hair gone fine and thin,
less meat to the scalp,
and not so much
ambition packed inside.
He squints from under the bill
as if the world
were a long ways off,
and when he tips it back
to open up his face
to conversation,
it looks so loose
you think that one of them,
the cap or he,
might blow away.

Cosmetics Department

A fragrance heavy as dust, and two young women
motionless as mannequins, dressed in black.

The white moth of timelessness flutters about them,
unable to leave the cool light of their faces.

One holds the other's head in her hands
like a mirror. The other leans into the long fingers

knowing how heavy her beauty is. Eye to eye,
breath into breath, they lean as if frozen forever:

a white cup with two lithe figures painted in black
and the warm wine brimming.

Biker

Pulling away from a stoplight
with a tire's sharp bark,
he lifts his scuffed boot and kicks at the air,
and the old dog of inertia gets up with a growl
and shrinks out of the way.

The Old People

Pantcuffs rolled, and in old shoes,
they stumble over the rocks and wade out
into a cold river of shadows
far from the fire, so far that its warmth
no longer reaches them. And its light
(but for the sparks in their eyes
when they chance to look back)
scarcely brushes their faces. Their ears
are full of night: rustle of black leaves
against a starless sky. Sometimes
they hear us calling, and sometimes
they don't. They are not searching
for anything much, nor are they much
in need of finding something new.
They are feeling their way out into the night,
letting their eyes adjust to the future.

In January

Only one cell in the frozen hive of night
is lit, or so it seems:
this Vietnamese café, with its oily light,
its odors whose shapes are like flowers.
Laughter and talk, the tick of chopsticks.
Beyond the glass, the wintry city
creaks like an ancient wooden bridge.
A great wind rushes under all of us.
The bigger the window, the more it trembles.

A Rainy Morning

A young woman in a wheelchair,
wearing a black nylon poncho spattered with rain,
is pushing herself through the morning.
You have seen how pianists
sometimes bend forward to strike the keys,
then lift their hands, draw back to rest,
then lean again to strike just as the chord fades.
Such is the way this woman
strikes at the wheels, then lifts her long white fingers,
letting them float, then bends again to strike
just as the chair slows, as if into a silence.
So expertly she plays the chords
of this difficult music she has mastered,
her wet face beautiful in its concentration,
while the wind turns the pages of rain.

Mourners

After the funeral, the mourners gather
under the rustling churchyard maples
and talk softly, like clusters of leaves.
White shirt cuffs and collars flash in the shade:
highlights on deep green water.
They came this afternoon to say goodbye,
but now they keep saying hello and hello,
peering into each other's faces,
slow to let go of each other's hands.

Skater

She was all in black but for a yellow ponytail
that trailed from her cap, and bright blue gloves
that she held out wide, the feathery fingers spread,
as surely she stepped, click-clack, onto the frozen
top of the world. And there, with a clatter of blades,
she began to braid a loose path that broadened
into a meadow of curls. Across the ice she swooped
and then turned back and, halfway, bent her legs
and leapt into the air the way a crane leaps, blue gloves
lifting her lightly, and turned a snappy half-turn
there in the wind before coming down, arms wide,
skating backward right out of that moment, smiling back
at the woman she'd been just an instant before.

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