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Splitting an Order by Ted Kooser (review)

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move past the potentially less flattering episodes in Chambers's career ultimately hinder the depth of analysis that Johnson provides.

Even so, by documenting the long career of the most powerful black leader in Nebraska, Johnson has provided an important contribution to the study of politics and African American life in Nebraska and the Midwest. Here's hoping that Johnson's word on Chambers will not be the last and that scholars of midwestern history in particular will take note of the "Maverick of Omaha."

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Ted Kooser, *Splitting an Order*. Port Townsend, Wash.:
Copper Canyon Press, 2014. 87 pp. \$23.00.

Ever since Ted Kooser's first collection of poetry appeared in 1969, it has become increasingly difficult, perhaps now impossible, to imagine contemporary American literature without his voice. Over the course of his career, he has published eleven collections of poetry and several works of nonfiction, including such familiar titles as *The Blizzard Voices* (1986), *Weather Central* (1994), *Braided Creek* (2003), and most recently, *Delights and Shadows* (2004), which won the Pulitzer Prize. Kooser was our National Poet Laureate from 2004–6—notably, he was the first person from the Great Plains to hold the office—and he currently edits the popular syndicated newspaper column, "American Life in Poetry."

His latest book, *Splitting an Order*, is full of moments that are recognizable to us all. At times, these tightly crafted and precise poems feel like an homage to the everyday and familiar. To read these poems is to see throwaway moments cast in a new light. Kooser is rightfully known for his clear-eyed observational powers, and in page after page of his new collection we encounter little moments that carry the grandeur of life itself—as a poet, he encourages us to watch the unspooling of time around us. His subject matter ranges from watching an elderly couple split an order at a local restaurant, to a woman rollerblading past him, to a moment on a country road where a car stops and the driver and passenger switch roles for the long journey ahead, to a zinc lid at the back of a dark garage.

Kooser's poems invite us to look at the world around us and, in this

looking, we come to appreciate just how fragile and fleeting our little lives really are. He has a tremendous gift for tapping into moments that are familiar and arresting to us all. In “Bad News,” he talks about a phone call in the middle of the night and how, after “the news is out [. . .] you move on cold feet room to room, / feeling as weightless as a soul, / turning on every light in the house, / needing the light all around you.” Due to such disquieting imagery, we are carried back to the sudden darkness around our own homes when such news hit us.

And yet, the very next poem is a celebration of life. In “Swinging from Parents,” we watch a child holding hands between her mother and father. Kooser writes, “She makes the shape of the y, / at the end of *infancy*, and lifts her feet / the way the y pulls up its feet, and swings.” There are many memorable poems in *Splitting an Order*, but this particular one lingers in the imagination long after the book is closed. Like so many of the poems in this book, it flares once again to life when, out in the world, we happen to see a child swinging from the arms of her parents. Perhaps this is the wonderment of Kooser’s work in general: because he writes about such familiar moments, we recall his poems when we see physical reminders of them happening right before us.

However, it is equally true that his poems spark our own memories, and we are nudged to recall what at first appears to be humdrum and ordinary. In “Closing the Windows,” he remembers his father shutting up the house before a thunderstorm. With “the uncertain white fingers / of lightning, fumbling around / with the black hem of the county” his father goes about closing windows before the rain hits. This is such a normal thing to do, especially in the Midwest during the summer. And yet, as Kooser notes at the end of this poem, “It was all so ordinary then / [. . .] but more than sixty years have passed / and now I understand that it was / not so ordinary at all.”

The longest poem in this collection is “Estate Sale” and, as we read it, we feel as if we are walking through someone’s home and examining items that are up for auction. Each stanza is a gathering of thoughts about an object that was once tied to someone’s life. We read about empty coffee cans, a split baseball, a windup wristwatch, and a lock of hair tucked into a “sleeve of waxed paper.” Buried in this poem are examples of Kooser at his absolute best. Consider how he describes an old twenty-five amp glass fuse: “Under the clear ice of its surface / it is easy to see the silver ribbon / of a motionless fish / its body aligned with the current.” Or this: “A sec-

tion of unused stovepipe / standing unsnapped and open / like somebody's coat, and in it / the thin blue smoke of spiderwebs."

Near the end, there is a short essay called, "Small Rooms in Time." Those familiar with Kooser's work will not be surprised to find prose pinned into the final pages of this collection, and while Kooser is mainly known as a poet, his nonfiction—such as *Local Wonders* (2004) and *The Wheeling Year* (2014)—mark him as a literary artist with gifts beyond one genre. In "Small Rooms in Time," he recalls a murder in Nebraska, one that took place in a house where he once lived years ago. To read this essay is to be reminded that Kooser should be celebrated for his prose just as strongly as he is celebrated for his poetry.

Splitting an Order is a remarkable collection from a writer who proves that the local does indeed hold the universal. It closes, appropriately enough, with a short poem that is simply titled, "Right Hand." In it, Kooser says, "This old hand with which I am writing, / holding its pen and pecking its way / across paper like a hen, has pulled me, / clucking with little discoveries, / across more than seventy years." He adds that, "looking back, it seems that every day / was rich with interest." That is the beauty of reading this volume of exquisite and perceptive words—we too see the world, rich with interest.

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John R. Van Atta, *Wolf by the Ears: The Missouri Crisis, 1819–1821*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015. 216 pp. \$19.95.

Balanced and brief. Those two adjectives provide a good summary of my review of John Van Atta's *Wolf by the Ears*. I fear, though, they diminish the accomplishments of the book. After all, what we take to be glowing reviews more often feature the antonyms to these descriptive terms. Rather than "balanced" and "brief," the reviews that make their way on to back cover blurbs more typically extol volumes as "bold" and "weighty." But Van Atta's book should remind us how much can be said in a brief text and how much there is to be said for a carefully balanced interpretation.

Wolf by the Ears is certainly not daringly revisionist. Primarily a work of synthesis, its first two chapters describe the confrontations that anticipat-