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A BISON ORIGINAL

## Lights on a Ground of Darkness

TED KOOSER

Available September 2009

\$10.95 paperback

74 pp. | 4 ½ x 8 | 3 photographs

978-0-8032-2642-5

\$15.50 Canadian/£9.99 UK

### Book Synopsis:

Like the yellow, pink, and blue irises that had been transplanted from house to house over the years, the stories of poet Ted Kooser's family had been handed down until, as his mother lay ill and dying, he felt an urgency to write them down. With a poet's eye for detail, Kooser captures the beauty of the landscape and the vibrancy of his mother's Iowa family, the Mosers, in precise, evocative language.

The center of the family's love is Kooser's uncle, Elvy, a victim of cerebral palsy. Elvy's joys are fishing, playing pinochle, and drinking soda from the ice chest at his father's roadside Standard Oil station. Kooser's grandparents, their kin, and the activities and pleasures of this extended family spin out and around the armature of Elvy's blessed life.

Kooser has said that writing this book was the most important work he has ever undertaken because it was his attempt to keep these beloved people alive against the relentless erosion of time.

### Author Biography:

Ted Kooser, winner of the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry and former U.S. poet laureate, is Presidential Professor of the University of Nebraska. He is the author of twelve books of poetry, including *Valentines* (Nebraska 2008) and *The Blizzard Voices* (available in a Bison Books edition). His award-winning prose book, *Local Wonders: Seasons in the Bohemian Alps*, is also available in a Bison Books edition.

## PRESS RELEASE

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### **New from the University of Nebraska Press: *Lights on a Ground of Darkness* by Ted Kooser**

LINCOLN, Neb (April 7, 2009)—In late 1997, as his mother was dying, Pulitzer Prize winner and former U.S. Poet Laureate Ted Kooser began something he'd meant to do for more than 50 years—to write the story of his mother's family. Painstakingly, with words, he recreated his grandmother's kitchen ("enameled yellow—like the inside of an egg"), his grandfather's gas station next door ("'full service' at a time when nobody has experienced service that is anything other than full"), his hometown of Guttenberg, Iowa, and the members of his family who lived there. He finished his work just before his mother died in 1998, and published it as a limited edition hardcover several years later. This fall, the University of Nebraska Press paperback imprint Bison Books will publish that memoir, *Lights on a Ground of Darkness*.

- Kooser has called *Lights on a Ground of Darkness* his most important work, because it was his attempt to keep these beloved people alive against the relentless erosion of time.
- Published once before as a limited edition hardcover, this is the first time the book has been available to a wide audience.
- Author is a Pulitzer Prize winner and a former U.S. Poet Laureate. He is also the creator of American Life in Poetry, which runs in newspapers across the United States.
- The book, a memoir, offers a glimpse into the life one of America's best-known poets.
- Though prose, *Light on a Ground of Darkness* is written in the simple, accessible, yet vivid language Kooser's poetry is known for.
- Bison Books editor Tom Swanson will be available at the Indie Book Buzz Forum on Saturday at 3:30 p.m. to discuss *Lights on a Ground of Darkness*.

**Related Links:**

University of Nebraska Press home:  
[www.nebraskapress.unl.edu](http://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu)

Ted Kooser home:  
[www.tedkooser.net](http://www.tedkooser.net)

*Lights on a Ground of Darkness* home:

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**About the author:**

Ted Kooser, winner of the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry and former U.S. poet laureate, is Presidential Professor of the University of Nebraska. He is the author of twelve books of poetry, including *Valentines* (Nebraska 2008) and *The Blizzard Voices* (available in a Bison Books edition). His award-winning prose book, *Local Wonders: Seasons in the Bohemian Alps*, is also available in a Bison Books edition.

**About the University of Nebraska Press**

Founded in 1941, the University of Nebraska Press (UNP) is a nonprofit scholarly and general interest press that publishes 160 new and reprint titles annually under the Nebraska and Bison Books imprints respectively, along with 20 journals. As the largest and most diversified university press between Chicago and California, with nearly 3,000 books in print, the University of Nebraska Press is best known for publishing works in Indigenous Studies, history and literature of the American West, literary translation, and sports history. UNP has also had a long-standing dedication to making available the best literature from around the world. With nearly 200 translated titles currently in print from five different languages, including two titles by J.M.G. Le Clézio, the 2008 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, the number and breadth of translated titles has distinguished UNP as one of the largest, most active American publishers of translated work.

A distinctive member of the University of Nebraska community, UNP supports the missions of research, teaching, and service. In addition, UNP's sustained commitment to publications on the peoples, culture, and heritage of Nebraska reflects decades of service to its home state. Learn more about UNP at [www.nebraskapress.unl.edu](http://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu).

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## Excerpts from *Lights on a Ground of Darkness* by Ted Kooser

### *From page 4*

On the south edge of this little town, past the empty mussel shell button factory and the lumberyard, past the abandoned creamery and a few trailer houses glinting in the sun, sits a red brick Standard Oil filling station and, near it, shaded by a tall catalpa, a white bungalow with a screened porch. The graveled driveway is lined with smooth boulders freshly whitewashed, and a neatly pruned hedge separates the front yard from the highway. On the porch, my grandmother, a thin, shy woman in her late sixties, carefully waters a huge fern in a wicker planter. There is a patch of irises next to the front stoop, yellow and salmon pink and blue, from roots that have been moved from house to house down the years.

In the yard behind the house, a wooden picnic table has been pulled up under a low-branching Chinese elm, and my sister, Judy, who is seven, and I, ten, are playing “Swinging Off the Table.” It’s a game we have just invented, and it involves great daring and much squealing and laughter. Each in turn kicks off and swings away from the table on a low branch that slowly bends to set us down on the grass. Our only audience as we play is my grandmother’s little flock of white leghorn hens, bunched together at our side of their pen, watching us as if we were something to eat. We are here during our annual two-week summer stay with our grandparents. Our mother is with us, somewhere in the house, and our father is two hundred miles away. He will be coming to take us all home when he is able to get away from his store...

### *From page 57*

But for now, it is summer, 1949, and I am still a little boy. Our time with our grandparents is over. My father has come to drive us home. Before we leave, he fills his arms with tiger lilies picked beside the house, and we start out walking up the gravel road to the cemetery. It is now too late for irises. They have shriveled to rags. My sister and I walk on either side of him. I look back and see my grandmother stooped in her garden, picking a few vegetables for us to take home. My uncle shuffles across the yard toward the filling station.

There’s a granite monument topped with the carved figure of a seated girl. Her head is bowed, and she looks sadly into her empty arms, which are pitted from many years of rain and snow. In the hollow of those arms my father arranges the bright orange flowers and steps back. We do not know whose grave this is, whose loss the statue memorializes. My father’s eyes mist over, for he is a soft-hearted man, easily moved. His is a very special sort of foolishness, and my sister and I are learning it from him. We carry flowers to this girl at the close of each summer. It’s what my father calls “tradition.”