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Lights on a Ground of Darkness
An Evocation of a Place and Time
Ted Kooser
University of Nebraska Press

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AN EVOCATION OF A PLACE AND TIME

Summer, 1949. Above the Mississippi, the noon sun bleaches the blue from a cloudless midsummer sky. So high in their flight that they might be no more than tiny motes afloat on the surface of the eye, a few cliff swallows dive and roll. At the base of the shadowy bluffs a highway weaves through the valley, its surface shimmering like a field of wheat; to the south, a semi loaded with squealing hogs shifts down for the slow crawl up out of the bottoms and into the bright, flat cornfields of eastern Iowa. The bitter odor of exhaust clings like spider webs to the long grass lining the shoulders of the road. Toward the top of the grade the sound of the engine levels out into a brash and steady saxophone note that rattles back through the cut, and then, with a fading whine, the truck is gone, leaving the hot road shining empty down the length of the valley.

The little town of Guttenberg, Iowa, is taking a midday nap under the trees on the bank of the river. Its wide streets are quiet, its window shades drawn down against the heat. Old elms sprinkle the deserted sidewalks with lacy, drifting patterns. There's a light breeze off the water, carrying the smell of fish

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and the soft, regular sound of waves lapping the sides of tied-up boats. In one back yard an old woman in a blue bathrobe and a wide-brimmed straw hat walks a plank pathway through her garden, inspecting the leaves of her beans with the tip of a cane.

Front Street, which in any other small town might be called Main Street, divides a shady riverbank park from a row of old store buildings. The Mississippi here is wide and smooth, pooled by a government lock and dam. Beyond the dark green channel islands, the bluffs of Wisconsin rise pale and vaporous. Far out, between two of the islands, a tug slowly pushes a long line of rusty coal barges north toward Minnesota. A few old men sit on shaded benches in the park, swapping stories and watching the river birds loop and skim over the water.

The buildings that face the river all date from the mid-1800s. Nearly all of them are two stories in height, built of cut limestone or of brick, with elaborate stone cornices. The original storefronts, with their high windows and recessed entryways, have been "modernized," but the original facades still peer over the tops of the glaring spreads of glass and the slick cummerbunds of new signs. You have to sit in the park and squint hard to see the town as it once was, a busy river port of the days of the big stern-wheelers, the fancy trim of its buildings mirroring the cut wooden gingerbread on the steamboats.

The businesses that line Front Street are those that

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one expects to find in any small town. There's a hardware store, its windows full of red power mowers, green fertilizer spreaders, and blue bicycles. There's the BonTon Dress Shop, unabashedly showing last year's fashions on dazed and flaking mannequins. There's the Blackbird Variety, with a leaky pop case out front. There's a bakery and a Thom McAn shoestore. There are a couple of buildings that once were stores but have since been converted into private residences, with curtains drawn across the display windows and potted plants on the stoops. At the north end of the row of buildings sits the post office, plain as a peach crate. At its side, the draft from a window fan shakes a dead spirea bush. The American flag runs down its hot steel pole like candle wax.

The banks of every river are made of history. In 1763, Marquette and Joliet drifted past this place. "Now here we are on this beautiful river!" wrote Father Marquette, having left the smaller Wisconsin River behind him. Later, boatmen from downriver bartered cargoes of tools, powder, guns, and traps for furs from French trappers, who in turn traded with the Sac and Fox. Long before there were any buildings in the town, there were crude landing docks roped together out of rough-sawn boards. Traders camped on the riverbank, sleeping in tents made by throwing a blanket over a hemp rope stretched between two trees. Once, according to the two-volume county history, two of these men

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fought a duel with rattlesnakes held in their hands. Both survived. In the 1840s, an artist named Henry Lewis drifted past here on his longboat, and painted a panorama of the Mississippi, from the falls of St. Anthony to New Orleans, on a roll of canvas twelve feet high and 1,325 yards long. The canvas was meant to be slowly scrolled past the proscenium of a theater during a lecture. In the late 1800s, a few miles up the river, at McGregor, the talented young Ringling brothers were just getting started on their circus business by performing their tumbling and juggling act for people on the street.

~ 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

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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.

The roof of my grandfather's filling station extends out over the pumps, supported by two stout brick columns, and in the shade of this overhang my grandfather, a short, bald man in a blue Standard Oil uniform and matching cap, is giving my Uncle Elvy a shave. Elvy sits on a wooden folding chair with a towel wrapped around his shoulders, white lather on his chin, and a look of infinite patience on his big loose face. A station wagon with Illinois plates, driven by a harried-looking woman and packed with wrestling children, has pulled in off the highway, and my uncle must wait while my grandfather pumps gas and checks the oil and washes the windshield. The Illinois children press their faces

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to the car windows, gawking and making faces at the funny-looking man with soap on his face. Elvy looks back, smiling through the foam.

My Uncle Elvy is at the center of this scene and at the center of our love. He has cerebral palsy and is wholly dependent upon his parents and upon a community that accepts him as its own. When he is up from his folding chair and on his feet—walking to the well for a pail of drinking water or along the roadside, evenings, coming home from fishing, cane poles rattling over his shoulder—he moves with a stumbling, pigeon-toed gait. His tongue is thick and almost always out, and his chin is usually in need of wiping. He has such difficulty forming words that it takes years of listening to him before you can understand what he is saying. He has dentures but refuses to wear them because they hurt his mouth. Like his mother's family, the Morarends, he is painfully shy. When he speaks, fighting hard for every syllable, he lowers his eyes and his hair falls forward in a loose, dark lock. He has a sweet, guileless smile and is fond of children, reaching to touch them with a soft, moist, tentative hand.

He loves to fish and he fishes nearly every day, all summer long. He will go to the river this very afternoon, and I will help him dig worms in the chicken yard, Elvy clumsy with the dirt fork and I on my knees in the manure-spattered clay, fighting the hens for the fat, wet worms.

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~ Below the government's lock and dam, the Mississippi meanders aimlessly through the muddy, overgrown bottomland, pooling in motionless sloughs and swilling up around hundreds of small, low islands covered by underbrush, driftwood, willows, and the stark white masts of dead cottonwoods.

The nearest backwater is less than a quarter-mile east of the house, across the narrow highway, the railroad tracks, and a strip of field corn that is troubled by too much water at the root and too many raccoons at the ear. Neither the slough nor the river beyond it can be seen from my grandparents' house, but the river continually declares its presence in the flights and cries of water birds and in the mournful lowing of riverboats pushing their strings of barges up the main channel.

The corn in that strip of bottomland belongs to another man, but my grandfather each summer chops a path through it for my uncle to follow to the river, a trail just wide enough to keep him from getting his fishpoles entangled as they thrash from side to side. If the owner of the land cares about the lost corn, he never complains. If it takes the loss of three or four rows of corn to get Elvy Moser down to the river and back, so be it.

When he returns at dusk, he will be dragging a gunnysack full of fish that leaves a wet slick along the shoulder like one made by a snail. He will turn into the yard and pour the sack on the grass for my grandmother to sort through. There are all

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sorts of fish in the slough, and he brings them all home because he has caught them and they are his: dogfish and gar, carp and buffalo and red horse, bullheads and channel cat, sunfish and bluegills. On the dark green, dewy grass of early evening, they shine like silver, a few of them still twisting, their sharp mouths gaping for air. We stand there slapping mosquitoes while my grandmother picks out several to clean for supper. Then she asks Elvy to throw the rest to the chickens, and my sister and I follow him to watch the hens as they fight over the fish.

~ Not everyone is good to Elvy. One of the old men who come to the station every day is Carl Beck, a squat, red-faced man in his seventies. His bib overalls are bleached at the crotch and he wears a railroader's denim hat. He is mean to my uncle and teases him mercilessly when my grandfather is not within earshot. "When your folks die, Elvy, you'll have to go to a home," he says in a coarse whisper, "and they don't feed you good in them places. They beat you with a stick if you don't talk right." My uncle's only defense against Carl Beck is to avoid him whenever he can, and when Beck comes walking down the shoulder toward the station, Elvy gets up and heads for the house. A few years from now, when somebody brings the news that Carl Beck has been found dead in his trailer house, my uncle's face will break into a broad, wet smile.

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