

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource
from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



Swinging from Parents

The child walks between her father and mother,
holding their hands. 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
like the *v* in *love*, between an *o* and an *e*
who are strong and steady and as far as she knows
will be there to swing from forever. Sometimes
her father, using his free hand, points to something
and says its name, the way the arm of the *r*
points into the future at the end of *father*.
Or the *r* at the end of *forever*. It's that *forever*
the child puts her trust in, lifting her knees,
swinging her feet out over the world.

Ted Kooser¹

Reflections

As another covenant period comes to a close at St. Stephen's and *Wellspring* takes a break until fall, I can share with my faithful readers that writing to you each week is at once one of my hardest assignments and also one of my most fulfilling. It is an interesting discipline—this attention to a single poem—as I wrestle each week with a desire to articulate what moves me about a certain poem while recognizing, paradoxically, that often what moves me is something for which language does not exist, or (I speak for myself only) defies my personal ability to express it. Even among those most scholarly readers, it would seem to me that any written response to beauty and to art will undoubtedly be incomplete, at best.

This poem, case in point, needs no commentary, no annotation or analysis. So sweetly does it capture a childhood bliss (even as our heart breaks knowing what this child cannot yet know, that in fact nothing lasts and we do not swing forever). So tenderly does it point toward faith, the gesture to the future, hope-filled and wide as the horizon. And so

¹ "Swinging from Parents" by Ted Kooser from *Splitting an Order*, Copper Canyon Press. Used by permission.

perfectly—gracefully and seemingly effortlessly—does the poet illuminate with a singular image that divine intersection of love, trust, and hope. I dare not shake the magic from the poem by talking too much about the magic itself.

When I was teaching undergraduates in an introductory poetry class, I used Ted Kooser's book, *The Poetry Home Repair Manual: Practical Advice for Beginning Poets*, mostly because I love the way it manages to affirm the seriousness of a poet's vocation while also taking some of the stiffness out of the stereotype about what a Serious Poet is. An excerpt from that book, which I include here, feels like an appropriate resolution to this season of *Wellspring*; I find it an inspiring invitation not only to continue reading (and writing) poetry but to deepen an appreciation for delight, for the value of careful attention, for the comfort of company as we journey. In his words:

A noted contemporary poet and critic has said we ought to keep poetry a secret from the masses. Another, the editor of a prestigious anthology of poetry, said that each nation ought to have no more than a handful of poets. Both sound pretty elitist, don't they? Well, we'll always have among us those who think the best should be reserved for the few. Considering the ways in which so many of us waste our time, what would be wrong with a world in which *everybody* were writing poems? After all, there's a significant service to humanity in spending time doing no harm. While you're writing [or reading!] your poem, there's one less scoundrel in the world. And I'd like a world, wouldn't you?, in which people actually took time to think about what they were saying. It would be, I'm certain, a more peaceful, more reasonable place. I don't think there could ever be too many poets. By writing poetry, even those poems that fail and fail miserably, we honor and affirm life. We say "We loved the earth but could not stay."

May this season be for you one of gentleness and rest, a season of trust, a season of peace and of poetry, swinging out over the world.

✧ About the poet

Ted Kooser (b. 1939) was born in Iowa and educated at Iowa State University and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He is praised for his plainspoken, conversational writing style, his gifted use of metaphor, and his celebration of beauty in ordinary things. He is the author of numerous collections of poetry, most recently *Kindest Regards: New and Selected Poems* (Copper Canyon Press, 2018), which surveys over 40 years of his career. Among his many honors are the Pulitzer Prize and his appointment as the United States Poet Laureate in 2004.



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