

Spring 1986

On David Lee & Ted Kooser

William Pitt Root

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Root, William Pitt (1986) "On David Lee & Ted Kooser," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 26 , Article 28.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss26/28>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

begins to realize what it means to be the newest in a long unbroken line of generations. It is a peculiarly American heritage he receives. The change will continue, the pain and the winters and the frustrations will continue. There is no doubt of this. But that is not all. There is still the land, and as long as there is that, there is hope and the will to continue. Listen to Ralph Beer:

I crested the ridge on Cutler Hill and started down toward the homestead fence, where I could see my roan running with the wind, his tail high and feathered sassy behind him, his rough mane lofting as he loped. Clods of muddy duff flew from his hooves, and he pretended to shy as they came down, half bucking, half frisking, imagining perhaps a herd of mares and a prairie without wire. I could feel it too in the wind, the promise of spring and more, that lifted the horse, even alone and gelded, to run against himself.

-Craig A. Holden

David Lee, *The Porcine Canticles*; Copper Canyon Press; Port Townsend, WA., 1985; \$7 Paper

Ted Kooser, *One World At A Time*; University of Pittsburgh Press; \$12.95 Cloth, \$6.95 Paper

David Lee and Ted Kooser are "plain speech" poets good enough to make us take another look at the notion of plain speech. Usually that term is as judgmental as it is descriptive: we expect plain speech to tell an unvarnished truth and not uncommonly to do so in a colorful way. We expect a little salt with the meat and potatoes, not Dom Perignon.

David Lee is a native of Southwestern Utah, with family roots that go back generations. He teaches English at a college and for years he raised pigs, thank goodness, because it was through the pigs that David Lee met John, his personal Sancho Panza. Theirs is a language of friendship, wrought out of the Utah dust and years of common effort, plus the sparks of indomitable spunk. That language is custom-made for hard work, hard laughter, hard living, and it is fit for finding poetry in pigs as surely as Van Gogh's simple style was fit to find beauty in an old pair of boots, the very boots you'd wear to load a boar into a pickup.

"Loading a Boar" opens *The Porcine Canticles* and gives us the key in which the rest of the poems are written. The unnamed narrator and his friend, John, have just tried to load a mean big boar. Four times it's jumped out of the pickup, knocking them both down, biting them. Jan brings them some beers, and what follows is, in effect, David Lee's *Ars Poetica*, in the vernacular: "John it ain't worth it, nothing's going right and I'm feeling half dead and haven't wrote a poem in ages and I'm ready to quit it all," and John said, 'shit young feller, you ain't got started yet and the reason's cause you trying to do it outside yourself and ain't looking in and if you wanna by god write pomes you can write pomes about what you know and not about the rest and you can write about pigs and that boar and Jan and you and me and the rest and there ain't no way you're gonna quit," and we drank beer and smoked, all three of us, and finally loaded that mean bastard and drove home and unloaded him and he bit me again and I went in the house and got out my paper and pencils and started writing and found out John he was right."

It's old advice, the oldest, but in that new key, that red dust pig-farmer vernacular, it sets into motion a whole new system of metaphor and parable that David Lee is uniquely equipped to wield. Both Jim Heynen and Denise Levertov have written whole collections of pig poems, good ones, too, bolstered in Heynen's case by childhood on a farm, in Levertov's by eloquence and mythic sensibility. But no one has written more convincingly, more expansively, more memorably of the pig than David Lee.

We find in this collection tales worthy of Faulkner's Snopes ("Salvage Grain") and praises ascendant as Christopher Smart's ("Jubilato Agno"), and we discover an off-the-road America missed in *Blue Highways*. Years ago, in response to a young man in Idaho who complained of feeling cut off from things that matter in the world, Gary Snyder suggested that the young man's dilemma was artificial, that what matters anywhere matters everywhere, and recommended he learn everything there was to know about something, anything, even barbed wire, and he would soon find his sense of connection restored.

David Lee's device is the pig, the pig itself, which connects him, and us, to an intact community few of us know exists and fewer still have dreamed could be so fascinatingly resourceful, so inventively common-sensical, so moving and amusing. It's poetry the Marlboro man could enjoy, and this is a book touched by the porcine genius of plain American speech.

Ted Kooser must be among the sweetest people in Nebraska, to judge from his poems, which time after time touch us in zones of the heart we may long since have consigned to the pre-Contemporary cards Hallmark era. I mean, how can a grown man accept a sophisticated audience of modern poetry readers to pick up a poem called "Decoration Day?" Well, Kooser does it, bless him, and it works. Usually.

The poems that don't work or, more often, the poems that fade after several rereadings, are those which press too hard upon sentiments too slenderly equipped to survive. When Kooser says, at the end of "A Roadside Shrine in Kansas," that "one kneeling there / can see / in the / shimmering distance / God / walking the beanrows" I see no such thing, not even beanrows. The risk of language so simple that it's exhausted upon first acquaintance has to be compensated for by