

AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, THE POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES

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BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE

In this fine poem about camping by Washington poet E. G. Burrows, vivid memories of the speaker's father, set down one after another, move gracefully toward speculation about how experiences cling to us despite any efforts to put them aside. And then, quite suddenly, the father is gone, forever. But life goes on, the coffee is hot, and the bird that opens the poem is still there at its close, singing for life.

Camping Out

I watched the nesting redstart
when we camped by Lake Winnepesaukee.
The tent pegs pulled out in soft soil.
Rain made pawprints on the canvas.

So much clings to the shoes,
the old shoes must be discarded,
but we're fools to think that does it:
burning the scraps.

I listened for the rain at Mt. Monadnock,
for the barred owl on a tent peak
among scrub pines in Michigan.
I can hear my father stir

and the cot creak. The flap opens.
He goes out and never returns
though the coffee steams on the grill
and the redstart sings in the alders.

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