

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

Storytelling binds the past and present together, and is as essential to community life as are food and shelter. Many of our poets are masters at reshaping family stories as poetry. Here Lola Haskins retells a haunting tale, cast in the voice of an elder. Like the best stories, there are no inessential details. Every word counts toward the effect.

Grandmother Speaks of the Old Country

That year there were many deaths in the village.
Germs flew like angels from one house to the next
and every family gave up its own. Mothers
died at their mending. Children fell at school.
Of three hundred twenty, there were eleven left.
Then, quietly, the sun set on a day when no one
died. And the angels whispered among themselves.
And that evening, as he sat on the stone steps,
your grandfather felt a small wind on his neck
when all the trees were still. And he would tell us
always, how he had felt that night, on the skin
of his own neck, the angels, passing.

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