

AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES, 2004-2006
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BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE, 2004-2006

Each of the senses has a way of evoking time and place. In this bittersweet poem by Jeffrey Harrison of Massachusetts, birdsong offers reassurance as the speaker copes with loss.

Visitation

Walking past the open window, she is surprised
by the song of the white-throated sparrow
and stops to listen. She has been thinking of
the dead ones she loves—her father who lived
over a century, and her oldest son, suddenly gone
at forty-seven—and she can't help thinking
she has called them back, that they are calling her
in the voices of these birds passing through Ohio
on their spring migration. . . because, after years
of summers in upstate New York, the white-throat
has become something like the family bird.
Her father used to stop whatever he was doing
and point out its clear, whistling song. She hears it
again: "Poor Sam Peabody Peabody Peabody."
She tries not to think, "Poor Andy," but she
has already thought it, and now she is weeping.
But then she hears another, so clear, it's as if
the bird were in the room with her, or in her head,
telling her that everything will be all right.
She cannot see them from her second-story window—
they are hidden in the new leaves of the old maple,
or behind the white blossoms of the dogwood—
but she stands and listens, knowing they will stay
for only a few days before moving on.

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