

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

Children at play give personalities to lifeless objects, and we don't need to give up that pleasure as we grow older. Poets are good at discerning life within what otherwise might seem lifeless. Here the poet Peter Pereira, a family physician in the Seattle area, contemplates a smiling statue, and in that moment of contemplation the smile is given by the statue to the man.

The Garden Buddha

Gift of a friend, the stone Buddha sits zazen,
prayer beads clutched in his chubby fingers.
Through snow, icy rain, the riot of spring flowers,
he gazes forward to the city in the distance—always

the same bountiful smile upon his portly face.
Why don't I share his one-minded happiness?
The pear blossom, the crimson-petaled magnolia,
filling me instead with a mixture of nostalgia

and yearning. He's laughing at me, isn't he?
The seasons wheeling despite my photographs
and notes, my desire to make them pause.
Is that the lesson? That stasis, this holding on,

is not life? Now I'm smiling, too—the late cherry,
its soft pink blossoms already beginning to scatter;
the trillium, its three-petaled white flowers
exquisitely tinged with purple as they fall.

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