

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

Here is Arizona poet Steve Orlen's lovely tribute to the great opera singer, Maria Callas. Most of us never saw her perform, or even knew what she looked like, but many of us listened to her on the radio or on our parents' record players, perhaps in a parlor like the one in this poem.

In the House of the Voice of Maria Callas

In the house of the voice of Maria Callas
We hear the baby's cries, and the after-supper
Rattle of silverware, and three clocks ticking
To different tunes, and ripe plums
Sleeping in their chipped bowl, and traffic sounds
Dissecting the avenues outside. We hear, like water
Pouring over time itself, the pure distillate arias
Of the numerous pampered queens who have reigned,
And the working girls who have suffered
The envious knives, and the breathless brides
With their horned helmets who have fallen in love
And gone crazy or fallen in love and died
On the grand stage at their appointed moments—
Who will sing of them now? Maria Callas is dead,
Although the full lips and the slanting eyes
And flared nostrils of her voice resurrect
Dramas we are able to imagine in this parlor
On evenings like this one, adding some color,
Adding some order. Of whom it was said:
She could imagine almost anything and give voice to it.

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