

# AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES, 2004-2006  
AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY © 2006 THE POETRY FOUNDATION WEBSITE: WWW.AMERICANLIFEINPOETRY.ORG CONTACT: ALP@POETRYFOUNDATION.ORG

## American Life in Poetry: Column 209

BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE, 2004-2006

I've gotten to the age at which I am starting to strain to hear things, but I am glad to have gotten to that age, all the same. Here's a fine poem by Miller Williams of Arkansas that gets inside a person who is losing her hearing.

### Going Deaf

No matter how she tilts her head to hear  
she sees the irritation in their eyes.  
She knows how they can read a small rejection,  
a little judgment, in every *What did you say?*  
So now she doesn't say *What?* or *Come again?*  
She lets the syllables settle, hoping they form  
some sort of shape that she might recognize.  
When they don't, she smiles with everyone else,  
and then whoever was talking turns to her  
and says, "Break wooden coffee, don't you know?"  
She pulls all she can focus into the face  
to know if she ought to nod or shake her head.  
In that long space her brain talks to itself.  
The person may turn away as an act of mercy,  
leaving her there in a room full of understanding  
with nothing to cover her, neither sound nor silence.

American Life in Poetry is made possible by The Poetry Foundation ([www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org)), publisher of *Poetry* magazine. It is also supported by the Department of English at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. Poem copyright ©1995 by Miller Williams, whose most recent book of poems is "Time and the Tilting Earth," Louisiana State University Press, 2008. Poem reprinted from "Points of Departure: Poems by Miller Williams," by Miller Williams, University of Illinois Press, 1995, and reprinted by permission of the author and publisher. Introduction copyright © 2009 by The Poetry Foundation. The introduction's author, Ted Kooser, served as United States Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress from 2004-2006. We do not accept unsolicited manuscripts.

American Life in Poetry ©2006 The Poetry Foundation  
Contact: [alp@poetryfoundation.org](mailto:alp@poetryfoundation.org)  
This column does not accept unsolicited poetry.