

AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES, 2004-2006
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American Life in Poetry: Column 216

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

Judy Loest lives in Knoxville and, like many fine Appalachian writers, her poems have a welcoming conversational style, rooted in that region's storytelling tradition. How gracefully she sweeps us into the landscape and the scene.

Faith

Leaves drift from the cemetery oaks onto late grass,
Sun-singed, smelling like straw, the insides of old barns.
The stone angel's prayer is uninterrupted by the sleeping
Vagrant at her feet, the lone squirrel, furtive amid the litter.

Someone once said my great-grandmother, on the day she died,
rose from her bed where she had lain, paralyzed and mute
For two years following a stroke, and dressed herself—the good
Sunday dress of black crepe, cotton stockings, sensible, lace-up shoes.

I imagine her coiling her long white braid in the silent house,
Lying back down on top of the quilt and folding her hands,
Satisfied. I imagine her born-again daughters, brought up
In that tent-revival religion, called in from kitchens and fields
To stand dismayed by her bed like the sisters of Lazarus,
Waiting for her to breathe, to rise again and tell them what to do.

Here, no cross escapes the erosion of age, no voice breaks
The silence; the only certainty in the crow's flight
Or the sun's measured descent is the coming of winter.
Even the angel's outstretched arms offer only a formulated
Grace, her blind blessings as indiscriminate as acorns,
Falling on each of us, the departed and the leaving.

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