

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 285

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

In our busy times, the briefest pause to express a little interest in the natural world is praiseworthy. Most of us spend our time thinking about other people, and scarcely any time thinking about other creatures. I recently co-edited an anthology of poems about birds, and we looked through lots of books and magazines, but here is a fine poem we missed, by Tara Bray, who lives in Richmond, Virginia.

Once

I climbed the roll of hay to watch the heron
in the pond. He waded a few steps out,
then back, thrusting his beak under water,
pulling it up empty, but only once.
Later I walked the roads for miles, certain
he'd be there when I returned. How is it for him,
day after day, his brittle legs rising
from warm green scum, his graceful neck curled,
damp in the bright heat? It's a dull world.
Every day, the same roads, the sky,
the dust, the barn caving into itself,
the tin roof twisted and scattered in the yard.
Again, the bank covered with oxeye daisy
that turns to spiderwort, to chicory,
and at last to goldenrod. Each year, the birds—
thick in the air and darting in wild numbers—
grow quiet, the grasses thin, the light leaves
earlier each day. The heron stood
stone-still on my spot when I returned.
And then, his wings burst open, lifting the steel-
blue rhythm of his body into flight.
I touched the warm hay. Hoping for a trace
of his wild smell, I cupped my hands over
my face: nothing but the heat of fields
and skin. It wasn't long before the world
began to breathe the beat of ordinary hours,
stretching out again beneath the sky.

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