

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 321

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

For me, the most worthwhile poetry is that which reaches out and connects with a great number of people, and this one, by Joe Mills of North Carolina, does just that. Every parent gets questions like the one at the center of this poem.

How You Know

How do you know if it's love? she asks,
and I think if you have to ask, it's not,
but I know this won't help. I want to say
you're too young to worry about it,
as if she has questions about Medicare
or social security, but this won't help either.
"You'll just know" is a lie, and one truth,
"when you still want to be with them
the next morning," would involve too
many follow-up questions. The difficulty
with love, I want to say, is sometimes
you only know afterwards that it's arrived
or left. Love is the elephant and we
are the blind mice unable to understand
the whole. I want to say love is this
desire to help even when I know I can't,
just as I couldn't explain electricity, stars,
the color of the sky, baldness, tornadoes,
fingernails, coconuts, or the other things
she has asked about over the years, all
those phenomena whose daily existence
seems miraculous. Instead I shake my head.
I don't even know how to match my socks.
Go ask your mother. She laughs and says,
I did. Mom told me to come and ask you.

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