

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

Your high school English teacher made an effort to teach you and your bored classmates about sonnets, which have specific patterns of rhyme, and he or she used as an example a great poem by Keats or Shelley, about some heroic subject. To counter the memory of those long and probably tedious hours, I offer you this perfectly made sonnet by Roy Scheele, a Nebraska poet, about a more humble, common subject.

Woman Feeding Chickens

Her hand is at the feedbag at her waist,
sunk to the wrist in the rustling grain
that nuzzles her fingertips when laced
around a sifting handful. It's like rain,
like cupping water in your hand, she thinks,
the cracks between the fingers like a sieve,
except that less escapes you through the chinks
when handling grain. She likes to feel it give
beneath her hand's slow plummet, and the smell,
so rich a fragrance she has never quite
got used to it, under the seeming spell
of the charm of the commonplace. The white
hens bunch and strut, heads cocked, with tilted eyes,
till her hand sweeps out and the small grain flies.

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