

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

My mother kept a handwritten record of every cent she spent from the day she and my father were married until the day she died. So it's no wonder I especially like this poem by Jared Harel, who teaches creative writing at Centenary College in Hackettstown, New Jersey.

Numbers

My grandmother never trusted calculators.
She would crunch numbers in a spiral notebook
at the kitchen table, watching her news.

Work harder and I'd have more to count,
she'd snap at my father. And so my father worked
harder, fixed more mufflers, gave her receipts

but the numbers seldom changed.
There were silky things my mother wanted,
glorious dinners we could not afford.

Grandma would lecture her: *no more garbage,*
and so our house was clean. The attic spotless.
In fact, it wasn't until after she died

that my parents found out how much she had saved us.
What hidden riches had been kept in those notebooks,
invested in bonds, solid blue digits

etched on each page. She left them
in the kitchen by her black and white television
we tossed a week later, though it seemed to work fine.

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