

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 388

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

There are people who believe that the afterlife exists in how we are remembered by the living, that we are rewarded or punished in the memories of people who knew us. Writing is a means of keeping memories fresh and vivid, and in this poem Judson Mitcham, a Georgia poet, gives his father a nudge toward immortality.

Writing

But prayer was not enough, after all, for my father.
His last two brothers died five weeks apart.
He couldn't get to sleep, had no appetite, sat
staring. Though he prayed,
he could find no peace until he tried
to write about his brothers, tell a story
for each one: Perry's long travail
with the steamfitters' union, which he worked for;
and Harvey—here the handwriting changes,
he bears down—Harvey loved his children.

I discovered those few sheets of paper
as I looked through my father's old Bible
on the morning of his funeral. The others
in the family had seen them long ago;
they had all known the story,
and they told me I had not, most probably, because
I am a writer,
and my father was embarrassed by his effort. Yet
who has seen him as I can: risen

in the middle of the night, bending over
the paper, working close
to the heart of all greatness, he is so lost.

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author, Ted Kooser, served as United States Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress from 2004-2006. We do not accept unsolicited manuscripts.

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