

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 438

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

One of the first things an aspiring writer must learn is to pay attention, to look intently at what is going on. Here's a good example of a poem by Gabriel Spera, a Californian, that wouldn't have been possible without close observation.

Grubbing

The jay's up early, and attacks the lawn
with something of that fervor and despair
of one whose keys are not where they always are,
checking the same spots over and again
till something new or overlooked appears—
an armored pillbug, or a husk of grain.
He flits with it home, where his mate beds down,
her stern tail feathers jutting from the nest
like a spoon handle from a breakfast bowl.
The quickest lover's peck, and he's paroled
again to stalk the sodgrass, cockheaded, obsessed.
He must get something from his selfless work—
joy, or reprieve, or a satisfying sense
of obligation dutifully dispensed.
Unless, of course, he's just a bird, with beaks—
too many beaks—to fill, in no way possessed
of traits or demons humans might devise,
his dark not filled with could-have-beens and whys.

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