

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 465

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

One of the founders of modernist poetry, Ezra Pound, advised poets and artists to “make it new.” I’ve never before seen a poem about helping a tree shake the snow from itself, and I like this one by Thomas Reiter, who lives in New Jersey.

Releasing a Tree

Softly pummeled overnight, the lower
limbs of our Norway spruce
flexed and the deepening snow held them.
Windless sunlight now, so I go out
wearing hip waders and carrying
not a fly rod but a garden hoe. I begin
worrying the snow for the holdfast
of a branch that’s so far down
a wren’s nest floats above it like a buoy.
I work the hoe, not chopping but cradling,
then pull straight up. A current of air
as the needles loft their burden
over my head. Those grace notes
of the snowfall, crystals giving off
copper, green, rose—watching them
I stumble over a branch, go down
and my gloves fill with snow. Ah, I find
my father here: I remember as a child
how flames touched my hand the time
I added wood to the stove in our ice-fishing
shanty, how he plunged that hand
through the hole into the river, teaching me
one kind of burning can ease another.
The branch bobs then tapers into place
and composes itself, looking
unchanged though all summer
it will bring up this day from underfoot.

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The introduction's 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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