

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

The ancient Chinese poets used to say that at some point in each poem the poet ought to lift his (or her) eyes, ought to look beyond the surface of the present into something deeper and more meaningful. Here is just such a poem by Linda M. Hasselstrom, who lives in South Dakota.

Planting Peas

It's not spring yet, but I can't
wait anymore. I get the hoe,
pull back the snow from the old
furrows, expose the rich dark earth.
I bare my hand and dole out shriveled peas,
one by one.

I see my grandmother's hand,
doing just this, dropping peas
into gray gumbo that clings like clay.
This moist earth is rich and dark
as chocolate cake.

Her hands cradle
baby chicks; she finds kittens in the loft
and hands them down to me, safe beside
the ladder leading up to darkness.

I miss
her smile, her blue eyes, her biscuits and gravy,
but mostly her hands.
I push a pea into the earth,
feel her hands pushing me back. She'll come in May,
she says, in long straight rows,
dancing in light green dresses.

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