

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

Kwame Dawes is the editor of *Prairie Schooner* and one of my colleagues at the University of Nebraska. Had I never had the privilege of getting to know him I still would have loved the following poem, for its clear and matter-of-fact account of a sudden loss.

Coffee Break

It was Christmastime,
the balloons needed blowing,
and so in the evening
we sat together to blow
balloons and tell jokes,
and the cool air off the hills
made me think of coffee,
so I said, "Coffee would be nice,"
and he said, "Yes, coffee
would be nice," and smiled
as his thin fingers pulled
the balloons from the plastic bags;
so I went for coffee,
and it takes a few minutes
to make the coffee
and I did not know
if he wanted cow's milk
or condensed milk,
and when I came out
to ask him, he was gone,
just like that, in the time
it took me to think,
cow's milk or condensed;
the balloons sat lightly
on his still lap.

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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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