

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

This past autumn, pruning a big lilac bush, I found a snakeskin that some bird had woven into its nest. Here's a poem about another find, from Stephen Behrendt, who lives and teaches in Nebraska. His most recent book is *Refractions*, from Shechem Press.

Snakeskin

Pruning back the old spirea bushes
that sprawled for years in summer's heat,
I bared the snake skin, a yard and a half long:
its naked empty length rippled in the streaming wind
lifting its ghostly coils from the dead shoots
that scraped the slough from the slithering body
that shed it in that narrow, shaded space.

I paused—who wouldn't?—shears poised,
slipped off gray canvas gloves, extracted
the sere, striated casing from the brown stalks
that had held it, silent, hidden.

I coiled the paper-thin curling sheath with care,
delicately, eased it into a simple squatty box
for keeping, for care, for my daughters
to take to school, to show, to explain
how some sinuous body we've never glimpsed,
that haunts about our shrubs, our porch,
left for us this translucent, scale-scored wrapper,
this silent hint of all that moves unseen.

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