

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 next time you open your closet, this poem will give you reason to pay a little more attention to what's hanging inside. Gary Whited is from Massachusetts and his most recent book is *Having Listened*, (Homebound Publications, 2013).

My Blue Shirt

hangs in the closet
of this small room, collar open,
sleeves empty, tail wrinkled.
Nothing fills the shirt but air
and my faint scent. It waits,
all seven buttons undone,
button holes slack,
the soft fabric with its square white pattern,
all of it waiting for a body.
It would take any body, though it knows,
in its shirt way of knowing, only mine
has my shape in its wrinkles,
my bend in the elbows.
Outside this room birds hunt for food,
young leaves drink in morning sunlight,
people pass on their way to breakfast.
Yet here, in this closet,
the blue shirt needs nothing,
expects nothing, knows only its shirt knowledge,
that I am now learning—
how to be private and patient,
how to be unbuttoned,
how to carry the scent of what has worn me,
and to know myself by the wrinkles.

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