

# 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 707

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

Peter Schmitt is a Floridian, and the following poem is from his book, *Renewing the Vows*, published by David Robert Books. Poetry seems to be the perfect medium for brief anecdotal stories, but most of us have higher expectations of a poem, believing it should reach beneath the surface and draw up something from the deeper parts of experience. This is just such a poem.

### The Bench

*It's all like a bad riddle, our widow friend  
said at the time. If a tree falls in the woods  
and kills your husband, what can you build from it?*  
That she was speaking quite literally  
we did not know until the day months later  
the bench arrived, filling that foyer space  
in the house the neighbors pitched in to finish.

She'd done it, she said, for the sake of the boys,  
and was never more sure of her purpose  
than when they were off, playing in the woods  
their father loved, somewhere out of earshot  
and she would be struggling in with groceries.  
For her, it was mostly a place to rest  
such a weight, where other arms might have reached

to lift what they could. Or like the time we knocked  
at her door, and finding it just ajar,  
cautiously entered the sunstruck hallway,  
and saw her sitting there staring into space,  
before she heard our steps and caught herself,  
turning smiling toward us, a book left  
lying open on the bench beside her.

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