

# 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 722

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

There are so many fine poems in Richard Robbins' new and selected poems, *Body Turn to Rain*, published by LynxHouse Press, that I had a difficult time choosing one to show you. This one, though, with its tablecloth trick, is one of my favorites. Robbins lives in Mankato, Minnesota, and teaches at Minnesota State.

### Old Country Portraits

My lost sister used to try the trick  
with the tablecloth, waiting until  
the wine had been poured, the gravy boat filled,  
before snapping the linen her way

smug as a matador, staring down  
silver and crystal that would dare move,  
paying no mind to the ancestor gloom  
gliding across the wallpaper like clouds

of a disapproving front—no hutch  
or bureau spared, no lost sister sure  
the trick would work this time, all those she loved  
in another room, nibbling saltines,

or in the kitchen, plating the last  
of the roast beef. How amazed they would be  
to be called to the mahogany room  
for supper, to find something missing,

something beautiful, finally, they could  
never explain, the wine twittering  
in its half-globes, candles aflutter, each  
thing in its place, or so it seemed then,

even though their lives had changed for good.

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