

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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