

AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, THE POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES

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BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE

In eighteen lines—one long sentence—James Doyle evokes two settings: an actual parade and a remembered one. By dissolving time and contrasting the scenes, the poet helps us recognize the power of memory and the subtle ways it can move us.

The City's Oldest Known Survivor of the Great War

marches in uniform down the traffic stripe
at the center of the street, counts time
to the unseen web that has rearranged
the air around him, his left hand
stiff as a leather strap along his side,
the other saluting right through the decades
as if they weren't there, as if everyone under ninety
were pervasive fog the morning would dispel
in its own good time, as if the high school band
all flapping thighs and cuffs behind him
were as ghostly as the tumbleweed on every road
dead-ended in the present, all the ancient infantry
shoulder right, through a skein of bone, presenting arms
across the drift, nothing but empty graves now
to round off another century,
the sweet honey of the old cadence, the streets
going by at attention, the banners glistening with dew,
the wives and children blowing kisses.

James Doyle is the author of "The Silk at Her Throat," Cedar Hill, 1999. Poem copyright © James Doyle and reprinted by permission of the author. This weekly column is supported by The Poetry Foundation, The Library of Congress and the Department of English at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. The column does not accept unsolicited poetry.

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