

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

Linda Pastan, who lives in Maryland, is a master of the kind of water-clear writing that enables us to see into the depths. This is a poem about migrating birds, but also about how it feels to witness the passing of another year.

The Birds

are heading south, pulled
by a compass in the genes.
They are not fooled
by this odd November summer,
though we stand in our doorways
wearing cotton dresses.
We are watching them

as they swoop and gather—
the shadow of wings
falls over the heart.
When they rustle among
the empty branches, the trees
must think their lost leaves
have come back.

The birds are heading south,
instinct is the oldest story.
They fly over their doubles,
the mute weathervanes,
teaching all of us
with their tailfeathers
the true north.

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