

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 113

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

Though the dog chose domestication, cheerfully enjoying human food and protection, most of the world's species look upon us with justifiable wariness, for we're among the most dangerous critters on the planet. Here Minnesota poet Freya Manfred, while out for a leisurely swim, comes face to face with a species that will not be trained to sit or roll over.

Swimming With A Hundred Year Old Snapping Turtle

I spy his head above the waves,
big as a man's fist, black eyes peering at me
until he dives into darker, deeper water.
Yesterday I saw him a foot from my outstretched hand,
already tilting his great domed shell away.
Ribbons of green moss rippled behind him,
growing along the ridge of his back
and down his long reptilian tail.
He swims in everything he knows,
and what he knows is never forgotten.
Wisely, he fears me as if I were the Plague,
which I am, sick unto death, swimming
to heal myself, in his primeval sea.

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