

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 164

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

How often have you wondered what might be going on inside a child's head? They can be so much more free and playful with their imaginations than adults, and are so good at keeping those flights of fancy secret and mysterious, that even if we were told what they were thinking we might not be able to make much sense of it. Here Ellen Bass, of Santa Cruz, California, tells us of one such experience.

Dead Butterfly

For months my daughter carried
a dead monarch in a quart mason jar.
To and from school in her backpack,
to her only friend's house. At the dinner table
it sat like a guest alongside the pot roast.
She took it to bed, propped by her pillow.

Was it the year her brother was born?
Was this her own too-fragile baby
that had lived—so briefly—in its glassed world?
Or the year she refused to go to her father's house?
Was this the holding-her-breath girl she became there?

This plump child in her rolled-down socks
I sometimes wanted to haul back inside me
and carry safe again. What was her fierce
commitment? I never understood.
We just lived with the dead winged thing
as part of her, as part of us,
weightless in its heavy jar.

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