

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 178

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

We mammals are ferociously protective of our young, and we all know not to wander in between a sow bear and her cubs. Here Minnesota poet Gary Dop, without a moment's hesitation, throws himself into the water to save a frightened child.

Father, Child, Water

I lift your body to the boat
before you drown or choke or slip too far

beneath. I didn't think—just jumped, just did
what I did like the physics

that flung you in. My hands clutch under
year-old arms, between your life

jacket and your bobbing frame, pushing you,
like a fountain cherub, up and out.

I'm fooled by the warmth pulsing from
the gash on my thigh, sliced wide and clean

by an errant screw on the stern.
No pain. My legs kick out blood below.

My arms strain
against our deaths to hold you up

as I lift you, crying, reaching, to the boat.

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