

# 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 183

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

Perhaps you made paper leaves when you were in grade school. I did. But are our memories as richly detailed as these by Washington, D.C. poet, Judith Harris?

### Gathering Leaves in Grade School

They were smooth ovals,  
and some the shade of potatoes—  
some had been moth-eaten  
or spotted, the maples  
were starched, and crackled  
like campfire.

We put them under tracing paper  
and rubbed our crayons  
over them, X-raying  
the spread of their bones  
and black, veined catacombs.

We colored them green and brown  
and orange, and  
cut them out along the edges,  
labeling them deciduous  
or evergreen.

All day, in the stuffy air of the classroom,  
with its cockeyed globe,  
and nautical maps of ocean floors,  
I watched those leaves

lost in their own worlds  
flap on the pins of the bulletin boards:  
without branches or roots,  
or even a sky to hold on to.

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