AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

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

To read in the news that a platoon of soldiers has been killed is a terrible thing, but to learn the name of just one of them makes the news even more vivid and sad. To hold the name of someone or something on our lips is a powerful thing. It is the badge of individuality and separateness. Charles Harper Webb, a California poet, takes advantage of the power of naming in this poem about the steady extinction of animal species.

The Animals are Leaving

One by one, like guests at a late party
They shake our hands and step into the dark:
Arabian ostrich; Long-eared kit fox; Mysterious starling.

One by one, like sheep counted to close our eyes,
They leap the fence and disappear into the woods:
Atlas bear; Passenger pigeon; North Island laughing owl;
Great auk; Dodo; Eastern wapiti; Badlands bighorn sheep.

One by one, like grade school friends,
They move away and fade out of memory:
Portuguese ibex; Blue buck; Auroch; Oregon bison;
Spanish imperial eagle; Japanese wolf; Hawksbill
Sea turtle; Cape lion; Heath hen; Raiatea thrush.

One by one, like children at a fire drill, they march
outside,
And keep marching, though teachers cry, "Come back!"
Waved albatross; White-bearded spider monkey;
Pygmy chimpanzee; Australian night parrot;
Turquoise parakeet; Indian cheetah; Korean tiger;
Eastern harbor seal ; Ceylon elephant ; Great Indian
rhinoceros.

One by one, like actors in a play that ran for years
And wowed the world, they link their hands and bow
Before the curtain falls.

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