

AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES, 2004-2006
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BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE, 2004-2006

People singing, not professionally but just singing for joy, it's a wonderful celebration of life. In this poem by Sebastian Matthews of North Carolina, a father and son happen upon a handful of men singing in a cafe, and are swept up into their pleasure and community.

Barbershop Quartet, East Village Grille

Inside the standard lunch hour din they rise, four
seamless voices fused into one, floating somewhere
between a low hum and a vibration, like the sound
of a train rumbling beneath noisy traffic.
The men are hunched around a booth table,
a fire circle of coffee cups and loose fists, leaning in
around the thing they are summoning forth
from inside this suddenly beating four-chambered
heart. I've taken Avery out on a whim, ordered quesadillas
and onion rings, a kiddy milk with three straws.
We're already deep in the meal, extra napkins
and wipes for the grease coating our faces
and hands like mid-summer sweat. And because
we're happy, lost in the small pleasures of father
and son, at first their voices seem to come from inside
us. *Who's that boy singing?* Avery asks, unable
to see these men wrapped in their act. I let him
keep looking, rapt. And when no one is paying
attention, I put down my fork and take my boy's hand,
and together we dive into the song. Or maybe it pours
into us, and we're the ones brimming with it.

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