

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

There have been many poems written in which a photograph is described in detail, and this one by Margaret Kaufman, of the Bay Area in California, uses the snapshot to carry her further, into the details of memory.

Photo, Brownie Troop, St. Louis, 1949

I'm going to put Karen Prasse right here
in front of you on this page
so that you won't mistake her for something else,
an example of precocity, for instance,
a girl who knew that the sky (blue crayon)
was above the earth (green crayon)
and did not, as you had drawn it, come right down
to the green on which your three bears stood.
You can tell from her outfit that she is a Brownie.
You can tell from her socks that she knows how
to line things up, from her mouth that she may
grow up mean or simply competent. Do not mistake
her for an art critic: when she told you
the first day of first grade that your drawing
was "wrong," you stood your ground and told her
to look out the window. Miss Voss told your mom
you were going to be a good example of something,
although you cannot tell from the way your socks sag,
nor from your posture, far from Brownie-crisp.
This is not about you for a change, but about
mis-perception, of which Karen was an early example.
Who knows? She may have meant to be helpful,
though that is not always a virtue,
and gets in the way of some art.

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