

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

For over forty years, Mark Vinz, of Moorhead, Minnesota—poet, teacher, publisher—has been a prominent advocate for the literature of the Upper Great Plains. Here's a recent poem that speaks to growing older.

Cautionary Tales

Beyond the field of grazing, gazing cows
the great bull has a pasture to himself,
monumental, black flanks barely twitching
from the swarming flies. Only a few strands of
wire separate us—how could I forget
my childhood terror, the grownups warning
that the old bull near my uncle's farm
would love to chase me, stomp me, gore me
if I ever got too close. And so I
skirted acres just to keep my distance,
peeking through the leaves to see if he still
was watching me, waiting for some foolish move—
those fierce red eyes, the thunder in the ground—
or maybe that was simply nightmares. It's
getting hard to tell, as years themselves keep
gaining ground relentlessly, their hot breath
on my back, and not a fence in sight.

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