

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

I love the way the following poem by Susie Patlove opens, with the little rooster trying to “be what he feels he must be.” This poet lives in Massachusetts, in a community called Windy Hill, which must be a very good place for chickens, too.

Poor Patriarch

The rooster pushes his head
high among the hens, trying to be
what he feels he must be, here
in the confines of domesticity.
Before the tall legs of my presence,
he bristles and shakes his ruby comb.

*Little man, I want to say
the hens know who they are.*
I want to ease his mistaken burden,
want him to crow with the plain
ecstasy of morning light as it
finds its winter way above the woods.

Poor outnumbered fellow,
how did he come to believe
that on his plumed shoulders
lay the safety of an entire flock?
I run my hand down the rippled
brindle of his back, urge him to relax,
drink in the female pleasures
that surround him, of egg laying,
of settling warm-breasted in the nest
of this brief and feathered time.

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