

AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES, 2004-2006
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American Life in Poetry: Column 253

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Animals are incapable of reason, or so we've been told, but we imaginative humans keep talking to our dogs and cats as if they could do algebra. In this poem, Ann Struthers looks into the mystery of instinctive behavior.

Not Knowing Why

Adolescent white pelicans squawk, rustle, flap their wings,
lift off in a ragged spiral at imaginary danger.
What danger on this island in the middle
of Marble Lake? They're off to feel
the lift of wind under their iridescent wings,
because they were born to fly,
because they have nothing else to do,
because wind and water are their elements,
their Bach, their Homer, Shakespeare,
and Spielberg. They wheel over the lake,
the little farms, the tourist village with their camera eyes.

In autumn something urges
them toward Texas marshes. They follow
their appetites and instincts, unlike the small beetles
creeping along geometric roads, going toward small boxes,
toward lives as narrow or as wide as the pond,
as glistening or as gray as the sky.
They do not know why. They fly, they fly.

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