

AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY

A FREE COLUMN FOR NEWSPAPERS BY TED KOOSER, POET LAUREATE OF THE UNITED STATES, 2004-2006
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When a poem has a strong story to tell, the simplest and most direct language is often the best choice because the poet may not want literary effects to get in the way of the message. Here's a good example of straightforward language used to maximum effectiveness by Jeanie Greensfelder, who lives in California.

Sixth Grade

We didn't like each other,
but Lynn's mother had died,
and my father had died.

Lynn's father didn't know how to talk to her,
my mother didn't know how to talk to me,
and Lynn and I didn't know how to talk either.

A secret game drew us close:
we took turns being the prisoner,
who stood, hands held behind her back,

while the captor, using an imaginary bow,
shot arrow after arrow after arrow
into the prisoner's heart.

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