

# 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 646

BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE, 2004-2006

Here's a poem celebrating milkweed by Bradford Tice, from his book *Rare Earth*, published by New Rivers Press. Our Monarch butterfly population depends upon milkweed, and perhaps a few people who read this won't chop down or pull up or poison one of these generous plants.

### Milkweed

I tell myself softly, *this is how love begins*—  
the air alive with something inconceivable,  
seeds of every imaginable possibility  
floating across the wet grasses, under  
the thin arms of ferns. It drifts like snow  
or old ash, settling on the dust of the roadways  
as you and I descend into thickets, flanked  
by the fragrance of honeysuckle and white  
primrose.

I recall how my grandmother imagined  
these wanderers were living beings,  
some tiny phylum yet to be classified as life.  
She would say they reminded her of maidens  
decked in white dresses, waltzing through air.  
Even after I showed her the pods from which  
they sprang, blossoming like tiny spiders,  
she refused to believe.

Now, standing beside you in the crowded  
autumn haze, I watch them flock, emerge from  
brittle stalks, bursting upon the world as  
young lovers do—trysting in the tall grasses,  
resting fingers lightly in tousled hair.  
Listen, and you can hear them whisper  
in the rushes, gazing out at us, wondering—  
*what lives are these?*

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