

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

Jill Bialosky is a New Yorker, an editor at W. W. Norton, and a daughter grieving the loss of loved ones. It's unusual for us to print two poems by one poet, in sequence, but this one and the one I selected for next week go very well together. They're from her new book *The Players*, from Knopf.

The Guardians

All day we packed boxes.
We read birth and death certificates.
The yellowed telegrams that announced
our births, the cards of congratulations
and condolences, the deeds and debts,
love letters, valentines with a heart
ripped out, the obituaries.
We opened the divorce decree,
a terrible document of division and subtraction.
We leafed through scrapbooks:
corsages, matchbooks, programs to the ballet,
racetrack, theatre—joy and frivolity
parceled in one volume—
painstakingly arranged, preserved
and pasted with crusted glue.
We sat in the room in which the beloved
had departed. We remembered her yellow hair
and her mind free of paradox.
We sat together side by side
on the empty floor and did not speak.
There were no words
between us other than the essence
of the words from the correspondences,
our inheritance—plain speak,
bereft of poetry.

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Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress from 2004-2006. We do not accept unsolicited manuscripts.

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